

Matthew 4:1-11 New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness

¹ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted^[a] by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, “*if* you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’^[b]”

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ “*if* you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,

so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’^[c]”

⁷ Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’^[d]”

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹ “All this I will give you,” he said, “*if* you will bow down and worship me.”

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’^[e]”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

SERMON

Here straight after the baptism of Jesus, and his heavenly affirmation “this is my Son whom I love”, we have the account of Jesus being sent out into the desert by the Holy Spirit, where he fasted for 40 days, in other words, he spent his time thinking about the things of God, not his earthly needs or desires. In Military terms we might say that this was boot camp, training. And then, all of a sudden, enemy contact. Satan shows up. This was an early meeting of enemy forces, a reconnaissance mission, where Satan tried to work out who he was dealing with, and if he could win without firing a shot. There was no battle of power, no wrestling, striking, lightning bolts, killing, chaining, hurling into lakes of fire, that was to come later. What there was, was propaganda, and it’s antidote: truth.

Propaganda: information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view.

This has been an ancient military strategy: If you convince the enemy that they cannot win, or that they have lost already, you may even get them to throw down their arms and surrender, even when they were in a winning position! Armies at war have sown misinformation and lies by radio, leaflet or internet and all sorts of other means, to destroy the confidence of the enemy. And propaganda can be cunning.

Sometimes it is not cunning or subtle, and when it is not, it is hilarious. Some of you may remember the original invasion of Iraq, and one particular minister in the government of Saddam Hussein: his name was Muhammad Saeed al-Sahhaf. But he was better known as comical Ali. Because he became a laughing stock for his obvious lies. He gave daily briefings on how the American were being led to their deaths, and how they were committing suicide in their hundreds outside the gates of the city, as they knew they could never win. Then he famously said that there were no U.S. tanks in Baghdad, and through the news camera microphones you could hear the clanking of tank tracks advancing, and the sounds of combat.

So this is an example of bad propaganda. No one believed it. But when it is done right, propaganda can be a powerful and subtle thing. Propaganda that works is not just outright obvious lies, or they would be discredited. It is designed to play on doubts, to inflame sore points, trying to get people to make their own decisions against a government or country or power.

And who would be better at the subtlety of lies than Satan, whose title is the “father of lies”?

Think for a minute about the tactics he used: Two variations trying to see if Jesus had any doubts about who he was, or what he was there to do, both introduced by that little word: “If”.

He did not say “you are not the Son of God”, a voice from heaven had just proclaimed that Jesus was. Jesus would argue against him straight away: “Yes I am”. Instead, he wanted Jesus to have that argument with himself, in his head: “Am I the son of God?” He was looking for doubt, for leverage. “If you are the son of God, you should be able to do this: Of course the unspoken end game is to make Jesus think: if I cannot do this, then maybe I am not the Son of God.”

But Jesus did not fall for it, did he? He knew the truth. He knew who he was. He expressed it in his answer, his closeness to his Father. “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

He tried again: “IF you are the son of God you should be able to throw yourself down from here.”

IF.

And again Jesus does not waver.

I think Satan realises at this point that this tactic is not working: so he goes away from identity and appeals to greed: All this I will give you, IF you bow down and worship me. A different sort of If, with another unspoken question: Okay, you claim to be the Son of God, but will he give you all this? What benefits come with being the Son of God? Is he holding out on you? **Is God’s heart for you really good?**

Thousands of years since the fall, Satan did not have any new material! Think about it: the temptation to Adam and Eve: Are you better off taking what you want than waiting for God to give it to you? Is he holding out on you? He just doesn’t want you to be like him. The same question: “Is God’s heart for you really good?”

And they had that argument with themselves, in their heads, and they justified their actions to themselves, and they fell.

So, what is Satan’s “IF” question for us? Can it go a little bit like this: “If God’s heart for you is really good, would he let you nearly go broke from drought?” If God was really

powerful, would he let a child get cancer? Would he let you get cancer, or lose your job, or your family, or whatever? He tries to tie our identity, and the size of God's love, to the size of our problems.

If God really loved you, would he let you suffer with constant pain?

We do not always know every word of Scripture to come back at every doubt and temptation, but we have something that we can use: Martin Luther used to do this a lot. When Luther was tempted by the devil he would say: "Get away from me! I am baptised!"

In other words, his identity was in the fact that he too was a child of God. I don't belong to you Satan, I belong to God almighty, Father Son and Holy Spirit. You remember them? The winning side, the side that has defeated you? I am God's Son or daughter, with whom he is well pleased. Just like Jesus is. My baptism assures me of that.

That's what this Lenten journey says to me: the heart of God for me is SO good that he sent his only son. The heart of Jesus for me is so good that he did not turn aside when he could have so often, in the temptation in desert, in the Garden of Gethsemane when he asked that the cup of suffering be taken from him. This is love, that he went through with it because of his love for me, and for you.

That is grace, that he gave his all for us.

Never forget that the heart of God for you is good. Once again this year let his Lenten journey, and his suffering, and his death in your place prove it to you. We are baptised. We are his children.

Amen