

“Into the Fire: Starved by the Spirit”

Dr. Jay Howell

February 21, 2021

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Luke 4:1-4

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Jesus kept silent the whole time, but you know what the Inquisitor talks to him about? Jesus’s temptations in the desert. He goes through them one by one. And you know what he had to say about them? “Jesus, you messed up. Missed a golden opportunity here.”

There was, I think, at least some part of Jesus two thousand years, that might’ve thought the same thing: “Is this too good to pass up? Is this offer too good to refuse?” The devil had come to him in the wilderness, after

Jesus had been led by the Spirit there, and the first thing the devil said to him was, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” And I have to think at least part of Jesus thought, might not be such a bad idea.

Does that sit easy with you? That Jesus was actually tempted? Things aren’t temptations if there isn’t at least something about them that is, you know, tempting.

For example, if the devil were to come to me and say, “Jay, I’ve got this pair of shoes that costs \$10,000, but if you worship me, you can have them for just \$8,000,” I gotta say, that’s not a temptation. Has no appeal to me. Not spending \$8,000 on a pair of shoes. If, however, the devil were to say, Jay, there’s a buy 1 get 2 free sale on T-shirts, then part of me might start thinking, “Well my name’s Johnny, and it might be a sin, but I’ll take your bet and you’re gonna regret, cause I’m the best there’s even been.”

Point is, there was something tempting about this, about what the devil was saying. Turn stone into bread. Bring relief to your starvation. And in some sense, there had to have been at least some semblance of a thought, “You know, maybe a piece of bread would be nice.” Even just a fleeting thought, maybe along with other fleeting thoughts of, “How did I get into this mess? Why was I led out here in the first place?” It’s only human to wonder such things.

Sometimes when we read the Gospels, we can make the mistake that Jesus was some kind of Superman walking around. Faster than a speeding bullet, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, all of that. Impervious to damage or weakness of any kind. And on top of that, a kind of emotional stoicism that makes Jesus into this kind of zen-tranced monk who went through life unaffected by everything and everyone around him. We can make the mistake of thinking of Jesus in that way.

But that wasn’t the type of existence the Gospels tell us about. Quite the opposite: they want us to know that as the Son of God, Jesus did indeed hunger and thirst and bleed. Just before this point, Luke tells about Jesus’s baptism, after which a voice comes from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus is the Son of God, being the obvious point. But then Luke does something the others Gospels don’t. Right after Jesus’s baptism, Luke gives us his genealogy, traces his lineage all the way back to Adam the first human—point being that this Jesus is fully one of us too.

So when Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness and eats nothing for forty days, he feels a very human sensation: hunger. How many of us are at our best when we’re hungry? Then with the fact that it was the *Spirit* that led him out into the wilderness, out into this time of hunger and exhaustion, how long would it take him to wonder, why was I led out into this?

Kind of an odd question. Why would the Spirit lead Jesus into this time of hunger, a time of temptation? Wouldn’t Jesus go on to teach us to pray, “Let us *not* into temptation.” Seems the Spirit is doing precisely that which Jesus wouldn’t want the Spirit to do.

We tend to wonder the same things, when we’re out in the wilderness. Out there, stripped of the life we were used to, out there, it seems, all on our own, out there without any safety net. It’s all sink or swim out here, survive or die, and it wears on you, doesn’t it? That constant uncertainty.

For a lot of us, it’s felt like we’ve been in the wilderness for almost a year. It was during Lent a year ago when all the pandemic lockdowns took effect in our city and across most of the country, and in varying degrees, we’ve been in that mode ever since. Why would we be led into this time, as individuals, as households, as a church? Why would God do this, or why would God let this happen?

It'd be hard to think Jesus very human at all if some of those questions didn't enter his mind, out there starving in the desert, but all the more so knowing that in a moment, he could end his pain. Very simple really. Just perform one of those miracles he would later become known for, just this one a bit early, just on the side, just for himself. Just a bit of bread, just to slake his hunger for a minute.

The devil ups the ante, though, doesn't he? "If you are the Son of God," he says, "command this stone to become a loaf of bread." "*If* you are the Son of God." A bit of taunt there. It's not just about bread, is it? Rolled into the very human sensation of hunger is the not-so-human quality of being the Son of God, and with that, his commission to come and through himself show the world who God is. Why wouldn't it be a good idea for the Son of God to come to a starving world and give bread, freely, abundantly, just by turning stone into it? Wouldn't that prove the compassion and provision of the Lord? Wouldn't that prove the love of God? How many would come to allegiance and reliance on the Lord if they were freely given bread?

That's exactly the point that the Inquisitor from that Russian parable made to Jesus in that jail cell. Doesn't providing bread bond people to those that give it? If you had just said yes here, the world could have had bread and would have looked to you for it. You messed up, Jesus.

In that story, Jesus doesn't say anything in response, but he does here in the desert. We tend to imagine him stoically and defiantly standing up and in a bold voice rebuking the devil, but I think more likely it was a faint, weak, barely even audible whisper of a voice that said, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

What did he mean by that? He's quoting Deuteronomy, which we heard earlier: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." But what does he mean by that? That we shouldn't eat? Doesn't make much sense. Jesus ate. He fed the multitudes in the wilderness. Heck, the sign by which he calls his followers to gather together is to share bread and cup.

Jesus maybe wasn't in the time, place, or inclination to give a whole sermon in response to the devil's taunt, but in those few words, I think he's sharing this: he's showing us what kind of a Son he would be; he's showing us what kind of a Messiah he would be; he's showing us that a faith that feels the need to be proven will never be as powerful as a faith that is freely shown, that's a faith that grows out of the Word of God.

When we're in the wilderness, how do we show faith, rather than try to prove it?

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I think about the winter storm that struck some the central southern states this past week, and with the cold, all the utility problems with water, gas, and electricity. What does bread look like there? A bottle of clean water? A warm room? What would faith that feels the need to be proven look like? Crying out, "God, if you're there, make this cold go away and restore all utilities immediately"? But one does not live on bread alone.

What would faith that is freely shown look like?

A man named Jim McIngvale owns a furniture store in Houston: Mattress Mack, he's called. When the cold hit, and when utilities became uncertain, he opened up his store, not for business, but for anyone who needed to sleep in a warm place. Those stranded on the streets came in, sleeping on the gallery furniture, resting a minute, while Mattress Mack went around with pastries and, you guessed it, bread.

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So when Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness and eats nothing for forty days, he feels a very human sensation: hunger. How many of us are at our best when we’re hungry? Then with the fact that it was the *Spirit* that led him out into the wilderness, out into this time of hunger and exhaustion, how long would it take him to wonder, why was I led out into this?

Kind of an odd question. Why would the Spirit lead Jesus into this time of hunger, a time of temptation? Wouldn’t Jesus go on to teach us to pray, “Let us *not* into temptation.” Seems the Spirit is doing precisely that which Jesus wouldn’t want the Spirit to do.

We tend to wonder the same things, when we’re out in the wilderness. Out there, stripped of the life we were used to, out there, it seems, all on our own, out there without any safety net. It’s all sink or swim out here, survive or die, and it wears on you, doesn’t it? That constant uncertainty.

For a lot of us, it’s felt like we’ve been in the wilderness for almost a year. It was during Lent a year ago when all the pandemic lockdowns took effect in our city and across most of the country, and in varying degrees, we’ve been in that mode ever since. Why would we be led into this time, as individuals, as households, as a church? Why would God do this, or why would God let this happen?

It'd be hard to think Jesus very human at all if some of those questions didn't enter his mind, out there starving in the desert, but all the more so knowing that in a moment, he could end his pain. Very simple really. Just perform one of those miracles he would later become known for, just this one a bit early, just on the side, just for himself. Just a bit of bread, just to slake his hunger for a minute.

The devil ups the ante, though, doesn't he? "If you are the Son of God," he says, "command this stone to become a loaf of bread." "*If* you are the Son of God." A bit of taunt there. It's not just about bread, is it? Rolled into the very human sensation of hunger is the not-so-human quality of being the Son of God, and with that, his commission to come and through himself show the world who God is. Why wouldn't it be a good idea for the Son of God to come to a starving world and give bread, freely, abundantly, just by turning stone into it? Wouldn't that prove the compassion and provision of the Lord? Wouldn't that prove the love of God? How many would come to allegiance and reliance on the Lord if they were freely given bread?

That's exactly the point that the Inquisitor from that Russian parable made to Jesus in that jail cell. Doesn't providing bread bond people to those that give it? If you had just said yes here, the world could have had bread and would have looked to you for it. You messed up, Jesus.

In that story, Jesus doesn't say anything in response, but he does here in the desert. We tend to imagine him stoically and defiantly standing up and in a bold voice rebuking the devil, but I think more likely it was a faint, weak, barely even audible whisper of a voice that said, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

What did he mean by that? He's quoting Deuteronomy, which we heard earlier: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." But what does he mean by that? That we shouldn't eat? Doesn't make much sense. Jesus ate. He fed the multitudes in the wilderness. Heck, the sign by which he calls his followers to gather together is to share bread and cup.

Jesus maybe wasn't in the time, place, or inclination to give a whole sermon in response to the devil's taunt, but in those few words, I think he's sharing this: he's showing us what kind of a Son he would be; he's showing us what kind of a Messiah he would be; he's showing us that a faith that feels the need to be proven will never be as powerful as a faith that is freely shown, that's a faith that grows out of the Word of God.

When we're in the wilderness, how do we show faith, rather than try to prove it?

It's been said that to someone who's starving, bread is the good news. I wonder what else bread looks like.

I think about the winter storm that struck some the central southern states this past week, and with the cold, all the utility problems with water, gas, and electricity. What does bread look like there? A bottle of clean water? A warm room? What would faith that feels the need to be proven look like? Crying out, "God, if you're there, make this cold go away and restore all utilities immediately"? But one does not live on bread alone.

What would faith that is freely shown look like?

A man named Jim McIngvale owns a furniture store in Houston: Mattress Mack, he's called. When the cold hit, and when utilities became uncertain, he opened up his store, not for business, but for anyone who needed to sleep in a warm place. Those stranded on the streets came in, sleeping on the gallery furniture, resting a minute, while Mattress Mack went around with pastries and, you guessed it, bread.

But Jim, a devout Catholic, wasn't trying to prove anything. He wasn't responding to a devil's taunt, "If you're truly a Christian, turn this furniture store into a shelter." Rather, it was an outpouring of faith, not a proof

of it. “It is not our privilege to do this,” he said. “It’s not our right to do this, it’s our obligation.... This is what we were put on Earth to do: help other people. When situations come up it’s time for us to spring into action and help people get a better view of the day because some of their lives right now are very dark.”

Good news to those in the wilderness, and Jesus shows us here in the desert that the good news is not bread alone, but faith freely shown. What will you make the good news look like?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.