

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Into the Fire: Trust Falls”

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*Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,*

*‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”*

*Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

*Luke 4:9-13*

Throughout Lent we’re doing a close reading of Luke chapter 4, well part of it anyway, looking at Christ’s temptations in the desert, but not just stopping there. Rather we’ll continue on into the beginning of his ministry in Galilee next week. Lent as a season is inspired in part by Christ’s forty days in the wilderness, forty days of fasting, forty days of trial and temptation, a season of hard preparation. It’s meant to guide us as a church, as we get closer to the cross, we too enter a time of penitent preparation.

So as we’ve looked at Christ’s temptations, we’ve asked, what is Jesus showing us by his refusal of them? What kind of Messiah is he indicating he would be? And all along the way, he’s showing us that he wouldn’t be the one to take the easy way out.

The devil first tempted him to turn stone into bread, then last week Rev. Dr. Emily Anderson shared about the second temptation to take authority over all the kingdoms of the earth. This week, we come to Christ’s last temptation. Let’s go to God’s Word.

[Read Luke 4:9-13]

Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

If you’re in the mood for a chuckle, look up “trust fall fails” the next time you’re on YouTube. I did, and I got a good laugh out of it. If you’ve never heard of trust falls, this is how they work. Usually they’re some kind of team building exercise, like if you’re on a retreat. One person is instructed to *fall* and has to *trust* their partner or the rest of the group to catch them. Usually it’s just one person leaning into another person, but sometimes in the high intensity versions, someone’s actually on a small platform a few feet off the ground and has to lean back until they fall backwards into the arms of their group. Now a lot of times folks are kind of sheepish about it, so when they fall they kind bend at the waist, and their backside falls first or they put a leg out to catch themselves, which makes it harder to catch you, but also shows you weren’t really willing to trust being caught. I remember when a group I was in did a bunch of trust falls, and the leader said, of all things, “Imagine like you’re trying to pinch a nickel, you know, in your backside,” and got to be honest, that really did the trick for good trust fall form.

Didn't have to worry about anyone folding while falling. Ultimately of course the point is that when you fall, your partner or your team catches you, and you build trust that way.

But if you're looking for a chuckle, look up "trust fall fails" on YouTube. I think this was a meme on TikTok over a year ago. Basically instead of a team building exercise, you just walk up to strangers and out of nowhere say "Trust fall!" and fall into them, seeing if they'll catch you. I know, smart, right? What could go wrong? Well, lots could go wrong, and that's what you end up seeing in all these trust fall fails. Just a bunch of strangers falling into other strangers and, lo and behold, being dropped to the ground or knocking people over.

And an unexpected trust fall is more or less what the devil is tempting Jesus to do. Verse 9 reads, "Then the devil took [Jesus] up to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.'" Two weeks ago we talked about whether Jesus was actually tempted by all this, and we offered then that you can't really call them temptations if they held no allure, no appeal at all to Jesus. The text tells us Jesus was tempted by the devil; that seems to mean there would be something actually tempting about what the devil was presenting to him.

So if that's true, as we come to this third temptation, we have to ask, what would possibly be tempting about this? Turning stone into bread, I get. Jesus was hungry. Assuming authority over all the kingdoms of the world, I get. Would've skipped over all the trials and hardship he was going to face later and gone straight to glory. But this, the devil's saying, hurl yourself to the ground. Why is that a temptation at all? What's the appeal to Jesus?

It seems the devil's reaching back into his arsenal for an old trick and then a new trick. First, he repeats a taunt he's used before, "*If* you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here." *If* you are the Son of God. He used this in the first temptation. "*If* you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." It's not just about bread; it's about proof, about affirmation. Same thing here it seems. It's not just throwing himself down to the ground; it's about proof, about verification.

Then the devil brings in a new trick. Twice he's been refuted with Scripture. In response to his first and second temptation, Jesus responds with Scripture to reject him, so now the devil brings in some Scripture of his own. He cites Psalm 91: "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you," then "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." What's the message there? God will catch you! God will protect you. "This is the promise of Scripture," the devil's saying. "Don't you believe in what the Bible tells you? If you do, then throw yourself down."

And even then, it's not just about proof, and not just about belief, it's about publicity too. If it was just a matter of being saved while falling from a high height, could have done that anywhere. Heck, the temptation right before this was apparently up high somewhere. Seems Jesus could have just as easily thrown himself down from that point. Why not just stay there and save the travel costs? Because it wasn't just about proof, not just about belief, but about publicity. They're in Jerusalem. And not just in Jerusalem, they're on top of the temple, the center of religious life in the city and for the whole people of Israel. Think of what would have happened if Jesus had thrown himself off of the temple, right there in front of everyone, and God had sent angels to catch him. What would've happened? You think it would've stayed quiet? Think about how word would've spread. How news of this Jesus who had been directly saved by the Lord miraculously would've gone to every corner of Jewish society, and even through that how word would have spread even beyond the Jewish people, to the Gentiles that this man flung himself off this temple in a backwater region of the Roman Empire but was saved by the agents of God.

How many would have come to seek after him then? How many would have come to recognize him truly as the Son of God in that instance?

So as far as why this would be tempting, it's like the devil's saying, "Okay, okay, I'm sure you are who you say are. And I'm sure folks may believe you later on, but wouldn't it be easier if you just threw yourself down, and God caught you? What are you going to do scratching around in these Podunk towns, healing someone here, teaching a few others there? Seems so tedious and inefficient. Why not mass communicate? Get your message out there. Show them who you really are. Just throw yourself off."

Well when you put it that way, doesn't sound so bad.

I'd go in for that. If I knew someone was going to be saved miraculously and publicly after hurling himself off the top of the temple, I might pay attention. You wouldn't? That'd be tempting to me, to go after the spectacle, to go after the catharsis, the excitement, the sensation. How many of us do that? Find ourselves lurching from one spiritual thrill to the next? I remember growing up, my youth group would do these mission trips each year, and those were huge for me, and that can be a really good thing. Felt truly spiritually alive. But then I'd catch myself in doldrums in between, kind of let down that the rest of the year wasn't the same way. It can be tempting to seek after the spectacle, the spiritual highs.

It can be just as tempting to offer them too. It's so easy to think, well if we just did this flashy thing, then people would pay attention. It'd be in the name of spreading the name of Jesus, but it is a bit showy too, but in the end it's better right? I remember back in Memphis a surreal conversation with a church member about activities for our young people, and he said, "You know, the church down the street had a chocolate syrup slip and slide. Where's our chocolate syrup slip and slide?" Kind of have to laugh. Kenton if you were planning on doing a chocolate syrup slip and slide, count me in by the way, it sounds delicious. But the temptation was, do this flashy, gimmicky thing, hoping that the Lord would...save us in a way.

Jesus's response is again curt and citing Scripture. "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Years ago, I remember watching this live TV special. It was about eight years ago. And a man named Nik Wallenda was doing something incredible. If you don't know the name, Wallenda is what you might consider a daredevil with a particular specialty: tightrope walking. A big wire suspended at a high height, usually in some exotic location, and he'd walk across it. For this TV special, he was walking across the Grand Canyon. No support harness, no net. Nothing. Just a balancing pole that he held in his hands.

I'll spoil the suspense for you. Nothing bad happened. It was four and half football fields and took about twenty minutes, and he made it safely to the other side. But the whole time—if you happened to have watched this, you may remember—the whole time he's on that wire 1500 feet above the ground, he's saying "Praise you God. Thank you, Jesus." And then at some point, when some wind picked up, he's saying, "Lord, help this cable to calm down." So I'm watching it, and I'm hearing him say all of that, and by all accounts he's a faithful guy, but in the back of mind, I'm thinking, "Do you really have to bring God into this?" If he had been forced out there onto that tightrope, like if someone said, "You have to walk across this tightrope or we'll blow up this bomb," I definitely get praying. But this was a live TV special, this was mass communicating, and he was doing this on purpose, and I couldn't help but think, 'Is this what testing the Lord looks like?'

Jesus, I think, could have been safe in thinking God would have caught him if he had thrown himself off that, and maybe he was tempted by the notion of declaring to all of the faithful gathered there at the temple in unmistakable terms who he was and who was with him. But he didn't. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

The irony—and I think this is true for all of the temptations—is that Jesus later does in fact do, in manner of speaking, precisely what the this fall from the temple would have done. In the first temptation, he's tempted to miraculously produce bread. Well, later on, he does precisely that, makes bread in the wilderness for the crowd. In the second temptation, he's tempted to claim authority over all the kingdoms of the world. Well, later on, he does precisely that. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," he says at the end of Matthew's Gospel. And here, he's tempted to throw himself unto his death, trusting in the Lord to save him. Well, later on, he does precisely that. He goes to cross willingly, selflessly, sacrificially, trusting that God by the power of the Spirit would raise him from the grave. Something ironic about that, I think, that every temptation is matched with something that Jesus actually does do later on.

But Jesus is showing us something in refusing this last temptation, showing us what kind of a Messiah he would be. He showing us that he's not going to be the kind of Savior that goes for spiritual spectacle, for the shock and awe campaign, to dazzle the masses with tricks so that they might pay attention. That's not what he intends to do. We'll see that he continues with that as he starts his ministry next week, but he's showing us here that he's not going to take the easy way out. Rather, the path to glory, he's showing us, isn't paved with bright lights and gimmicks, but by the faithful, sacrificial life seeking to show God in every step, in every word, in every action.

What if we sought to do the same?

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