

Into the Wilderness

Matthew 4:1-11

Today we're going to consider 4 things

1. The reality of spiritual evil
2. The strategy of Spiritual evil
3. The downfall of Spiritual evil
4. And then a 4th point that I'll tell you when we get to it.

1. The Reality of Spiritual Evil

So, first, this passage throws it straight out there that Spiritual evil is *real*. After his baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted *by the devil*.

In verse 10, Jesus calls this figure *Satan*. Now we don't know what form Satan took in the wilderness. Or in what way this conversation actually unfolded. But what we do see in Jesus' three temptations is that this evil is not an abstract spiritual force. Rather, Jesus faces up to a *real, personal, intelligent* spiritual being. This passage, in fact the whole Bible, tells us us that when we look out at the world around us, and we see wickedness, and chaos and division – that at the bottom of every evil is real, personal, intelligent spiritual evil.

The American pastor Tim Keller puts it this way:

*If you think all that was behind the Holocaust was Hitler
If you think all that was behind slavery was economics, or even
racism
If you think all that is behind your addiction is bad parenting
Then you are naive. There's more to it than that. There's an
intelligence. There is the devil and there are demonic forces.*

The source of evil in this world is not simply psychology, or sociology, but Satan.

The Satan that Jesus meets in the desert.

The same spiritual being that slithered up to Adam and Eve and tempted them in the garden. This is the great enemy of God, and the foe of humanity about to whom God said in Genesis 3:

*I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers; (Genesis 3:15)*

According to the Bible, the story of humanity is one of spiritual struggle. We no longer experience life in the garden. Our life is lived in the wilderness. There is a wildness around us, there is a wildness in us – and there is the devil prowling around looking to do us harm and keep us from the presence of God.

The Bible opens our eyes to this reality. But even more than that, this passage shows us that Jesus steps into our wilderness and that he faces our foe.

2. The Strategy of Spiritual Evil

And so we also then the *strategy of Spiritual evil*. Here in the temptations of Jesus we get a window into the way that the devil operates in every temptation. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus was tempted *in every way, just as we are*. And while these three temptations might seem a bit left field at first, they take us to the very heart of Satan's schemes – in two senses.

- *Unbelief*

And so the first, and the most fundamental, is *unbelief*. The Devil's principal tactic is to call into question what God has revealed to be true about himself.

And the key to this I think is to see how crucial the very first word of this chapter is. *Then*, we are told, Jesus was led into the wilderness. The *THEN*, ties the temptations of Jesus to his baptism. And at Jesus' baptism, what has he just heard. Chapter 3 verse 16:

As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Jesus walks off into the wilderness with his hair still wet from the water and the words of his Father ringing in his ears. And after 40 days, what is the first thing the devil says?

"If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

And then again, *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down [from the highest point of the temple]."*

He cuts right to the heart of Jesus' identity, and calls into question the Words of God. In effect, the devil is saying exactly the same thing he said to Eve in the garden: "Did God really say..."

"Did God really say you are his Son? Would the beloved Son be left hungry in the desert? How can you really be so sure he is on your side."

And so the temptation for Jesus is to feed himself rather than trust his Father. The temptation is to prove to himself that he is in the right, rather than resting in the promises of God's Word.

This is the essence of every temptation that we face. To doubt that God will provide for us, to disbelieve that God will protect us, and so instead of depending on him we depend on our selves. At the heart of every sin is the urge to self-provision, and self-protection, to pursue our desires apart from the God who loves us and cares for us.

And so we lie. Because how is telling the truth going to work for us?

And we fail to be generous. Because who will look out for us if we give what we have away?

And we bitterly complain about government restrictions. Because how can this be what God really wants for us?

And we consume too much food, or drink, or media, because how else will we be satisfied?

We throw ourselves into our work at the expense of our families, and friends and our faith, because do I really matter if I don't have a career to show for it?

We fail to pray, and we leave our Bible's unopened, because did God *really* say that he would listen to us and reveal himself to us?

- *Up and Up*

The nature of temptation is *unbelief*. And then we also see that *pattern of temptation* is up and up.

Did you notice the movement through out this passage? Jesus' first temptation takes place on the dessert floor, surrounded by stones. Then, in verse 5, the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. And then they go further up in verse 8.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour.

There is a trajectory here as the devil takes Jesus higher and higher. Not just in position either. First he is tempted to fill his stomach, then prove his sonship, then to rule the whole world.

And the point is this: the Devil desires always promises us to take us to the heights. Remember his Words to Eve in the garden:

Take and eat he says: *For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*

You can see it in your mind's eye can't you? Eve reaching up, grasping to take not just the fruit, but to take her place on a throne. To rule her own life, blinded to the great fall that awaits as a consequence of Sin.

And this is what the Devil is offering Jesus. A way *up*. To fill his stomach without waiting for God. To display his sonship for all to see without trusting God's will and word. To take all authority *now* and to avoid the road of suffering and hardship that will take him all the way to the abject shame of the cross.

Go up! Says the Devil. Take it! It's all yours, if only you abandon your God.

And so it is with us. The great temptation is to go up and up, to grasp for ourselves what we can only truly receive from God's hand. To abandon the way of trust and seek good apart from God. It's subtle, but I think it's everywhere:

What is gossip, or a harsh put down if not a grasping for ourselves a place with the in-crowd at the exclusion of loving those on the out?

What is pornography, or adultery, but a grasping for intimacy without the hard work of loving sacrifice for another?

What is holding a grudge, other than a grasping for justice apart from true forgiveness and reconciliation?

I remember on a hike for school in year 11, we and 5 other friends were in a group. And one day we looked at the map for the walk and we saw that on the map it really looked like you could take a straight line from A to B, if only we weren't so rigid in sticking to the long and winding track.

We started to bush-bash for an hour or so I reckon until the scrub got incredibly dense and we realised we had no idea where we were and had no hope of going forward. We thought it was pretty hilarious, but in hindsight we were actually pretty lucky to stumble back onto the right path and make it to the campsite while a little light remained.

This is the work of Satan in temptation. To cause us to doubt the goodness of God's way, and to take a short-cut to success for ourselves. But of course it always leads to disaster. The way of unbelief, the climb up and up apart from God ends always ends with a fall. A fall into sin, into guilt and shame, into enmity with God, and ultimately into death.

3. The Downfall of Spiritual Evil

But here in Matthew 4, Jesus does not fall. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus has been tempted in every way, just as we are—*yet he did not sin*. Indeed, it is the devil who falls as Jesus commands “AWAY FROM ME SATAN!” In verse 10. And specifically, Satan meets his match as Jesus meets temptation with *the words of Scripture*, and *the way of the Spirit*.

- *The Words of Scripture*

Now, Jesus’ use of the Bible is probably the most outstanding feature of this passage. At every point of course, Jesus responds to the devil’s schemes with the Word of God.

But don’t miss the point. It’s not the words of the Bible have some sort of magic devil repelling quality – like garlic to vampires or something. The point is that Jesus overcomes the temptation towards unbelief by standing on the solid ground of God’s promises. The devil’s question is always “Did God really say...”, and unlike Adam Jesus responds with a firm, “Yes, he really did say that, and I really believe him.”

He doesn’t need to *prove he is the Son of God*. For he *trusts his Father’s Word*. Above the grumbling of his stomach, and the suggestions of Satan, Jesus hears the voice of his Father: “You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased.”

If you look again at the passage you can see how Jesus’ understanding of Scripture is radically God-centred:

Verse 2

Verse 7

Verse 10

Jesus trusts God’s Word, precisely because it is *God’s Word*.

Indeed, the devil shows us what a perverse evil it is to use Scripture torn apart from humble dependance on God. But Jesus shows us the power of the Bible when we hear it, and respond to it, as it really is: the very Word of God our Father in heaven.

- *The Way of the Spirit*

Jesus wields the Words of Scripture. And he also walks the Way of the Spirit.

Imagine for a second that you were a bystander at the baptism of Jesus. What might you expect to see as you stand on the banks of the Jordan River. Perhaps a shock-wave of glory? A grand display of the Spirit's power? A march into Jerusalem to overthrow Rome and take the throne? After all, the God of Israel had just unveiled—publicly, audibly, visually—his promised Messiah.

Nope. Instead, though, you would see Jesus shake out the water from his hair, pause and look at the mud on the bank, and then walk off toward the desert.

For Jesus did not come into the world to magnify himself. He came to be crucified. Jesus rejects the up and up of Satan for the down and down way of service in the Spirit. One commentator puts it this way:

This is now the second time the adult Jesus has gone down and been lifted up. When he went down into John's baptism he received God's best gifts coming up. Now in the wilderness, he has stuck with God's low Word and Way rather than do anything devilishly sensational, spectacular, or "successful," and when it is all over he dines well and with a good conscience.

This is the way of the Spirit. The Spirit leads Jesus down into the world in his incarnation. Then down into the waters of baptism and down into the desert to be tempted. Ultimately the Spirit will lead Jesus down to the cross and into the deep darkness of death. And yet his death itself proves to be victory. His humiliation is Satan's humiliating defeat: *And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*

Down *and then up*. Jesus falls this far only to rise again. And in the end he will receive from his Father the provision and the protection and the power that were only empty promises from the mouth of Satan.

The devil is real and dangerous, but he meets his downfall in the life and death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. As one writer says:

The Father puts Jesus into the wilderness; the Father will get him out again. Meanwhile, Jesus will simply trust the Father's Word...:heaven is open above him, the Spirit is alive within him, he is the well-loved son; he will be alright.

Christ, our champion

Now remember I said there was a fourth point. I wonder what you think the fourth point ought to be. On the one hand, it's very tempting (forgive the pun) for the final point to be: NOW YOU DO THE SAME!

Fight the devil with the words of Scripture! Go the way of the Spirit! You too can live a victorious life. We could even give it a name like: *Certain Spiritual Success: Seven Scriptures to Put Satan to the Sword* (or something like that!)

A couple of years ago we took our youth group away on a camp and one of the talks was on the story of Cain and Abel. You know the story. Cain was warned that sin was crouching at the door, and so he needed to *fight*. And the big takeaway from the talk was, Cain failed, but you can fight! And I know at least one of the kids in our group made the resolution to fight against her sin when they got home from camp.

And then, a couple of weeks later they shared how discouraged they were. They had tried to fight...but had failed. So many times, even in a couple of weeks. And if our only point to finish today was fight, many of us would experience the same thing. Firm resolve, a valiant fight, failure and dejection. Because we are *all Cain*. We are all Adam and Eve in the garden. We are all unfaithful Israel in the desert. We could never fight against the devil in our own strength and hope to win.

But that's not the fourth point. For this passage is not about what we need to do. This passage is pure gospel.

This passage is about what Christ has done to bring about the devil's downfall. And the fourth point is that everything he did in the wilderness, he did it *for you*.

In a little booklet called *How To Read the Gospels*, Martin Luther put it like this:

The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognise him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own. This means that when you see or hear of Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ himself, with his deeds and suffering, belongs to you. On this you may depend as surely as if you had done it yourself; indeed as if you were Christ himself.

Jesus steps into our wilderness. He fights our battle and he *wins*.

Jesus is the true Adam who listens to and trusts God's Word.

He is the true Cain, the Son of the Woman who crushes the serpent's head.

Jesus is the true Israel who is led out into the wilderness and yet remains faithful to his Father.

Jesus is the true David, who single-handedly goes out to fight the enemy and wins against the odds.

This is Jesus stepping in where every human has come and failed, and he wins. And he wins for us!

He doesn't turn the stones in the bread to provide for himself! *Instead he is torn apart so that he can feed us with his own body and blood.*

He doesn't throw himself from the temple for a dramatic rescue to prove he is God's Son. *Instead he hurls himself to to the cross to dramatically rescue us and make us Son's and daughters of God.*

And he doesn't seek power for himself. *Instead he gives up his power so that we can be raised up with him.*

And this is where Matthew's gospel ends. With Jesus declaring to his disciples "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me."

But because he went down through the cross and not up out of the wilderness he can also say, "Surely I am *with you* to the very end of the age."

This is the image that I've had in my head over the last few days. I imagine Matthew 4 like a wild-west showdown in the wilderness. It's just Jesus and the devil, one on one. And where every other human has failed, Jesus wins.

And because he has won that victory, it means we fight a very different battle. We don't look within for the power to fight. Jesus fought alone, but we fight together. Jesus was a lone ranger but we are joined to a vast army. We stand side by side with brothers and sisters who encourage us and spur us on. And so we share our temptations and our struggles with one another – not only to "keep each other accountable" but so that we can speak God's Word to each other, and preach the gospel to one another. And we can pray with and for each other: Our Father in heaven , *give us today our daily bread and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.*

And even more than that we fight side by side with the risen and victorious Jesus. And Jesus teaches us that our spiritual warfare is with a *defeated devil* because we are in the company of a *conquering Christ*.

And so, as Martin Luther told his parishioners, when faced with temptation we don't simply try our best to follow Jesus' example. Rather we "fall down and say 'O Christ, who has overcome the devil, help me!' Then the devil must soon fall."

Or as we sing in Luther's beautiful hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*:

*Did we in our own strength confide,
our striving would be losing,
were not the right Man on our side,
the Man of God's own choosing.*

You ask who that may be?

Christ Jesus, it is he;

*The Lord of Hosts his name,
from age to age the same;
and he must win the battle.*

*And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God has willed
his truth to triumph through us.*

*The prince of darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo! his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.*