

Our Greatest Needs 1) A Champion for the Defeated

Matthew 4:1-11 • 2023-03-05 • Lent 1- delayed 1 week due to snow



Some of you might be familiar with the scene of a popular children's movie. There are three little girls standing by as one of them plays a carnival game. One girl keeps on trying and keeps on missing. Her dad keeps grudgingly giving the booth attendant another dollar and another. Finally, she hits the target. But the game is rigged, and nothing happens. There's no prize. This causes the dad to become upset. When he can't reason with the carnival operator he turns to other devices. And he happens to be a world-class super villain who carries guns so destructive they look like they could power a nuclear reactor. "My turn," he says as he steps up to play. The attendant hides in horror as the gun unloads and destroys everything except the prize the little girl wanted. He hands her the prize he won for her, a toy unicorn pony. Wouldn't it be nice to have someone like that always backing you up? The schemes we face are, of course, much more serious. And our enemy is far more dangerous than any carnival booth operator. He is a liar and schemes to rob us of everything until we join him in the pits of hell. And he doesn't play fair. We are outmatched, and outwitted, defeated by him. But today we see how God meets our greatest needs. We need a champion who will face the enemy on our behalf and who will win for us. We will look at Matthew 4 to see how the Son of God crushed the scheming serpent.

Recall how at his baptism Jesus was declared by the Father to be the beloved Son of God. The Holy Spirit came upon him and remained on him. But the Spirit didn't guide the Son into a life of leisure. He led the Son off to the battlefield, into the wilderness. He had come to face our enemy. And he had to do it alone.

The devil is a powerful and sinister spiritual being, a fallen angel. He succeeded in tempting Adam and Eve in paradise. And for the next four millennia he enjoyed a perfect rate of success in scheming against every man and woman. The greatest men fell before him. Abraham stumbled in his fears. Job ended up defiantly demanding an answer from God. He carries the title "prince of this world" in the sense that all sinners are under his sway.

But the Father declared Jesus to be his Son, the promised one. He was the promised savior who would crush the serpent's head. And the devil with his perfect track record came to Jesus to tempt him. The devil might have thought he had it easy. Adam had caved into temptation when surrounded by plenty and beauty in the garden of Eden. But the serpent had this man at his weakest. Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights. His human body near the breaking point as he walked alone in the wilderness. And don't get any false ideas that Jesus was some sort of superman who didn't feel the pains. He was fully human. Matthew and Luke feel compelled to add the obvious fact: "he was hungry." He had the same need, the same pains when we go without food.

Now after forty days Jesus' weakest point is painfully obvious. "*If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.*" The devil will hit you and I when we are weak. For each of us that weakness will be different during different stages in life, and the devil will attack as he knows each weakness comes. The young man in his 30s who is having marriage trouble will find the devil can get a foothold with a female coworker who is also in a shaky marriage. The person who just lost his job or his health and will be at a desperate time when the enemy will tempt him to self-medicate with alcohol. The teenager who is undergoing changes and facing peer pressures will struggle against the lie that a gender change, an identity change, or even self-mutilation will somehow make them feel happier. The tempter knows when we are weak. He seizes whatever chance he can get to convince you to turn from God's plan.

Jesus was fasting for forty days. How much discomfort can you endure before you are easily triggered into anger, make bad choices, or lash out with words you later regret? When you get to know somebody, you don't really know them until you experience how they handle the hard times. Now we get to see the real character of Jesus.

The problem wasn't that Jesus might make bread for himself. On the surface the devil's suggestion seems harmless. The problem was that this was the time for the Son to accept a humble life. The devil wanted Jesus to reject that difficult plan. Did you catch the jab? "*If you are God's Son...*" Jesus shouldn't have to endure pain. And if the Father loved him he shouldn't let him suffer hunger. It was true that Jesus was the Son of God. He did deserve better. But taking matters into his own hands would be to reject the Father's plan for him.

The devil will use this same temptation against you. He will seek to get you to doubt God's goodness when you suffer. "If you are really a loved child of God then why doesn't he step in right now to remove the pain?" These temptations are also real threats. The devil would have us think that good health, success, and abundant physical blessing are our measure of God's goodness toward us. Our faith would be shallow and empty even if our stomachs were full.

Our champion was up to the challenge. He wielded the sword of the Spirit against our enemy. "*It is written, 'Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*" He quoted from Deuteronomy 8. That records a time when the people of Israel were tested for forty years in the wilderness. They had to learn the hard way that it wasn't enough merely to have God fill your stomach and supply you with food. They spent forty years learning to depend on their God despite their circumstances. It was a hard learned lesson which they often failed.

What about us? Do we sometimes act as if having good things and wealth is the end goal of our life? Do we live like we are only chasing after what makes us physically comfortable? It won't be enough. All the food and comforts in this world are empty and meaningless without the Word of our God. We often have failed to trust God's love when times were tough or even failed when things became uncomfortable. But our champion did not fail even in the hardest time.

Jesus showed his trust in the Father. The devil then craftily built another argument into a pious sounding expression of trust. He led Jesus to a high place on the temple in Jerusalem. *"It is written 'he will command his angels concerning you to guard you, they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"* Notice how the devil approached from every angle. He pretended to express admiration for the Son's trust. "Show me how much you trust!" Martin Luther observed, "If the devil does not succeed in robbing us of our confidence in God, he will go to the other extreme and try to make us cocksure and much too daring." The devil couches his temptations in a Scriptural sound. The devil does, after all, masquerade as an angel of light.

When do we end up putting God to the test? Consider the teenager who becomes careless with driving because God has kept him safe in the past. We trust that God will keep us from all harm and ill and keep us healthy. But does that mean we should drive without a seatbelt? Does God's protection mean we should go around licking every doorpost and never wash our hands to make him prove his love? Should we presume that he will bless our carelessness?

Once again, Jesus referred to the Scriptures from Deuteronomy. *"It is also written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"* Notice firstly that Jesus didn't let the devil twist Scripture. Do we let Scripture stand and let it speak for itself? For all the times we failed to let Scripture speak, he let Scripture interpret Scripture. The people of Israel had failed miserably at this test during the 40 years in the wilderness. They demanded a miracle from God. Have we been so humble in faith or at times tested our God? The devil knows all the time he has succeeded in getting you to be foolish despite your trust in the Lord—and put God to the test. But for all the times we gave into a presumptuous attitude of faith, Jesus did not. And The serpent's scheming was crushed again.

Once he has tried all other tactics the devil will eventually resort to outright defiance against God. This is where Eve and Adam took the bait. The devil promised them something great in exchange for just one small act of defiance against God. He tried this simple tactic with the Son of God. He showed Jesus the splendor of all the world's kingdoms and then promised, *"All this will be yours if you just bow down and worship me."* You might say this couldn't have been a legitimate temptation for Jesus. But consider his course. He knew that those 40 days were only a taste of what is to come. He knew that he would be tested and tried by his enemies and even his friends. He knew he would be pleading in agony in the garden that the cup of suffering coming his way be taken from him. He has the shadow of the cross looming before him. And how simple a thing to make it all just go away: just a little one-time act of worship.

The devil certainly gives this open and blatant type of lie to Christians. Just a small token of allegiance is all he asks for. And he promises grand things. Just one time letting it slide and a great immediate bit of pleasure. But that is what sin really is. It is a single act of betrayal, a momentary defiance that leads to eternal damnation. And how often don't we fall into this temptation! I look back at Adam and Eve and their one-time act of rebellion. And in desperate fear I see the same guilt in my own life. Just a small infraction, just once, and this pleasure will be all yours. The devil never delivers on his promise. But he always succeeds in eventually getting his victims to fall into his trap.

Except one target never fell victim to his attacks. Jesus picked up the sword of the Spirit to slay his enemy once more. For the third time quotes from Deuteronomy, "It is written, 'worship the Lord your God and serve him alone'." And there was something he added before that. He was the champion for the defeated. "Away from me Satan." There was no more the devil could do. He had lost. Jesus remained completely innocent. Jesus remained the Son, whom the Father loves and is well pleased. *"He was tempted in every way, just as we are, but was without sin."* (Heb 4)

Now consider what all this means for us! Look who stepped into our place to face our enemy! The devil thought he could win over all the human race. But then our champion stepped in to fight in our place. "My turn" the Son of God said. Jesus moved forward from there until before his death on a cross, he openly declared, "Now the prince of this world will be driven out!" Satan was trampled in defeat! Not only did Jesus die the sinless death needed to pay for our sins, but he also supplied the righteousness we need. He handed us the prize which he won for us: righteousness!

This Sunday we recall Romans 5. *"For just as through the disobedience of the one man (that's Adam) the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man (that's Jesus) the many will be made righteous."* We can be tempted to think we can fight the devil at his own game, use reason and justify sin. But that is not a battle we can win! Jesus, true man, true God, wins for us. In our stead he stood. Now we stand *in his name*.

We are no longer defeated, but conquerors through Christ. When we face temptation, we need the Word which Paul says can extinguish the flaming arrows of the enemy. We can't wage battle without it. But with Christ we can say *"Away from me Satan."* And Satan cannot withstand us. We are *"more than conquerors through him who loved us,"* (Ro 8:37) our champion, Jesus. He defeated our enemy and won for us the prize of righteousness, peace, and life.