

After his baptism by John, the same Spirit with which Jesus was anointed by the Father leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The wilderness was the Judean desert. The Jordan River originates north of Galilee and winds its way down to Judea to the south and eventually to the Dead Sea. While Galilee receives rainfall in the winter, the area adjacent to the Dead Sea is fortunate if it rains one inch in a whole year. This area is very desolate and mostly uninhabitable. Occasionally the Bedouin shepherds pass through as they move their flocks to new pasture.

Moreover, this area is the lowest strip of land below sea level on the surface of the planet. In the summer, the heat is scorching. In the winter, it can be pleasant with temperatures around 70 degrees Fahrenheit. While there is some wildlife there, especially the kind associated with desert habitat (scorpions, snakes, insects), the fact that the water in the Dead Sea is undrinkable makes it difficult for anything living to survive. At the present time, Israel extracts minerals from the Dead Sea and uses them in the manufacture of lotions and skin care creams.

Jesus is fasting during his stay in the desert. This was a common spiritual discipline among Jews—as it is for other spiritual traditions as well. There are different reasons for fasting. However, probably chief among them is that the practice builds endurance and an ability to control bodily appetites. The notion of spirituality includes the strength to stay in control of bodily urges and passions. Paul counseled us to focus on things that are above, not on things that are below. Fasting is one practical way of doing this, especially when it is accompanied with prayer.

The time of the fast was “forty days and forty nights.” In other words, a significant period of time. Jesus would have found the strength and comfort he needed to accomplish this from the Spirit. In fact, we often become much more aware of the presence of the Spirit during times of discomfort and unfulfilled desire. The empty places in our heart are filled with the Spirit when we allow ourselves to experience want. On the other hand, when we fulfill our every desire, when we eat and drink heartily, when we distract ourselves with various forms of entertainment, when we live a life of what Kierkegaard called “immediacy” (immediately staving off want and seeking superficial pleasure), the Spirit will have no room within us. It’s no accident that hyper consumption leads to a loss of faith.

Jesus, on the other hand, was driven to the far end of want. After the “forty days,” he was “famished.” This was the perfect time for the tempter to enter with scene. Temptation is often acute in times of discomfort because it offers an immediate escape from the suffering. Alcohol, drugs, food, and buying objects of pleasure are tempting for just this reason. They can be ways of receiving immediate relief from whatever the cause of suffering may be. Sometimes, the cause is mere boredom. Sometimes it’s the pain of loss or the anxiety that accompanies uncertainty. Unfortunately, when we succumb to

temptations such as this, we may find temporary relief from the pain. What we won't find is a healthy resolution to it.

This is the first time that the devil, portrayed as an enemy of God and a source of human trials, appears in scripture. This concept underwent an evolution in the thinking of Hebrew prophecy. That there is a malevolent force of some kind active in the world became more clear to the Jews when the Doctrine of retribution no longer seemed to adequately explain the level of evil and suffering they faced. Previously, suffering was thought to be a punishment from God for human sin. But when the suffering seemed out of balance with the offence, force of evil at work in the world looked to be the likely explanation.

In any case, it's important to understand that evil is understood as the power of non-being. Evil doesn't have any independent existence as a part of creation. God called everything he created "very good." Rather, evil is like a shadow. It's there. It casts darkness. But it does not exist on its own. Like a parasite, it feed on the destruction of that which is good. And because its aim is to destroy, that too is its end. Were evil allowed to flourish unopposed, it would destroy itself along with everything else. The power of non-being ends in non-being.

Therefore, the devil's purpose here is to destroy the One who was sent to put him out of business. And so the devil attacks Jesus where he is most vulnerable, namely, his extreme hunger. And the devil does so by appealing to the fact that Jesus has the power to alleviate his suffering anytime. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Sounds reasonable. Jesus does not have to go through this for his own sake. He did not become human for the sake of any self-benefit. This is being done entirely for the sake of us sinners. Of what value are we to One who already possesses all the divine attributes?

Jesus' answer points to both his source of strength and his reason for enduring this. He is centered entirely in the word of God. Bread alone does not suffice for human life. Our lives cannot be fulfilled by taking care of our bodily needs alone. Our lives are ultimately dependent on the word of God. This is also where the life that endures comes from. Moreover, for Jesus, God's mission for him is to live the sinless life that will eventually become our gift of righteousness. In other words, he is doing this for our sake.

The first temptation had to do with the relationship between our physical and spiritual being. Which one drives us? Which one is in possession of our souls and therefore our destiny as well? Can our faith and love for God overcome the temptations of the flesh? Not on our own. This we can do only through the presence of Christ who is given to us as God's gift of righteousness. In other words, he is defeating temptation in himself so that he can do it for us.

The next attempt on the devil's part involves the possibility of trying to tempt God Himself. "Test your God." And then it's the devil who quotes scripture, proving the fact that scripture can be used for evil as well as good, depending on the motives of the one

using it. In fact, scripture has been used to justify slavery, persecute Jews, and kill unbelievers. Scripture's purpose is to witness to Christ. When it is used for that, it becomes the Word of God. The devil too mangles scripture for his own purposes. Jesus responds by using it as a witness to his Father and so defeats the devil a second time.

Since things tend to happen in threes in the Bible, there is yet a third temptation: the power and glory available to those who want to become like God in this world. But Jesus knows better than anyone that our lives have no substance, meaning, or joy apart from God. We worship God also because God alone fills our hearts with love and eternal life. When we face danger, we run. When we encounter God, we worship.

At this point, the devil abandons this futile effort and leaves in utter failure—a picture of his ultimate destiny. Jesus meanwhile receives divine grace in the form of angels who minister to him, a sign that the time of testing is over.

Having received the Spirit, and having defeated his adversary by holding fast to God's word, Jesus is now ready to begin his ministry. His task is to show that God's Kingdom—God's rule—has come near to us in him. This he will do by demonstrating God's power to redeem us from any and all destructive, evil, and deadly influences. This he will do by teaching and preaching with the authority of God. And this he will do by reaching out to the rejected, the marginalized, sinners, and anyone else who is oppressed by evil in the world, some of it in the structures of society itself. This will cause alarm on the part of those whose self-interest is in keeping the status quo. Because his actions will work to "drain the swamp," those who have made a nice home in the swamp will fight back. In fact, their fight will be to the death because they have everything to lose. Jesus knows what he is walking into. He knows that when he introduces God's rule into a sinful system, the counter reaction will be fierce. And he knows he will have to endure whatever they dish out. And this he will have to do without reacting in kind, for he came not to be conformed to the sin of the world but to transform us sinners through the power of divine love. That is what the rule of God is all about.

Coincidentally, when the time of temptation was over, John the Baptist was arrested. Prophets were never much appreciated because their very role was to call the powerful to account. Since John was baptizing in the same general area, Jesus withdrew to the north—to Galilee. This provides Matthew with another opportunity to suggest that a prophecy was fulfilled so as to make sure Jesus' actions could be identified as fulfilling the scriptures. He begins his ministry in Peter's hometown of Capernaum with the proclamation that defines his whole message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

By the way, only in Matthew is the "Kingdom of God" translated into "the kingdom of heaven." Why? Because Jews don't use the name of God. This practice served as a "fence" to insure that no one would ever use God's name wrongly and thus violate one of the Ten Commandments.

Next, Jesus calls his first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, three of whom will become favored during his ministry. Capernaum was located on the banks of the Sea of Galilee, a large lake that supported a significant fishing industry. No one made much money doing this, but it did develop into an export industry when people learned how to preserve fish with salt. Magdala was the town where the fish were prepared for export—the town Mary Magdalene came from.

Jesus calls his disciples with an air of authority that causes them to abandon everything to follow him. This “speaking with authority” will be a source of amazement for everyone. No one presumed to have such authority at this time with the exception of the Romans. For Jews, authority came from God through Moses. Therefore, anyone who presumed to teach with authority had to justify what he said with a valid interpretation of the Torah. Being the Son of God, this was not necessary for Jesus.

Chapter 4 ends with a synopsis of Jesus’ initial activity. Everything he does is meant to demonstrate that, in him, the kingdom of heaven has come near. He cures everyone brought to him. He travels throughout the whole region, including gentile areas. Pretty much every disease known at the time is mentioned. Moreover, his fame spreads rapidly, and he draws large crowds.

Finally, it is important to understand that Jesus’ miracles were not understood or “supernatural” events that overrode the laws of nature. This idea was born during the European Enlightenment after scientific investigation identified certain predictable “laws” in nature. This led to the theory that all nature was governed by laws. This worldview persisted up until the discovery of quantum physics in the 20th century. While science persists in understanding regularities that make predictions possible, the idea that everything is governed by laws is dead.

In Jesus’ day, people would have seen his cures as “reversals” rather than as breaking laws. The same God who created had the power to recreate and restore that which was broken. These reversals in the normal course of things indicated that God’s rule in creation was being restored. Because Jesus was the change agent in this regard, he was identified as the One through whom God’s rule was being reintroduced. Ultimately, this was to be understood as a sign of the fact that redemption was drawing near.

Thus endeth Chapter 4.