

The Temptations of Christ Revisited

THEN was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an-hungered. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down; for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee, and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan; for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

Let's look together at the Three Temptations of Christ, in today's Gospel.

Command that these stones be made bread.

How does this appeal to me? It's fast food. Don't have to wait in line. Don't have to tip the server. Don't even have to pay for it. And it satisfies. It puts to rest the immediate need, which is hunger. The consequence? I feel better. I am filled. The pain of hunger subsides. The crisis is over.

So why does Jesus refuse it? He'd eaten nothing for forty days. *But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.* No matter how much food I stuff into my body, it demands more. Its effect lasts at best a few hours, and I'm back at the table again. Is that the purpose of life? Is that why we're born, we grow up, we go to college, we get a job, we spend three score and seven on this earth, to sit ourselves down at the table three times a day to get a meal, if it's available? The answer is a resounding "Yes!", if man is just a body. If we are just a body, then nothing is too good for the body. All of life revolves around it. Society should extend every available means on behalf of the body. It is the ultimate good. Bodies have rights, because bodies are... *bodies!*

How can I *not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God?* I can't even see God's words, let alone figure out how to eat them, in order to live by them. Besides, why should God intrude into my space? Of what possible practicality are these words? They won't increase my paycheck. And I don't know anything about God's words. Such is the cry of a world which long ago gave into this temptation.

But Jesus certainly surely speaks here, among other things, of the Ten Commandments. Heck, even a child can remember them! Just think of Commandment #1: *Thou shalt have no other gods before me*. Suddenly I've lost my appetite. *No other gods?! "Now, Jesus, just what do you consider a 'god'?" "Well, have you ever considered this sinful habit of yours that you've been excusing year after year? Now you know I've spoken to you about this, don't you?" "What's wrong with it?" I respond. "Everyone else does it!"* But His silent, loving gaze tells it all. One after one, He moves me through the commandments, stopping long and hard to allow me time to ponder them. Now believe me, by this time, my physical hunger pangs have abated, because there's something of a much higher order going on. I know in my heart that it's business that's just got to be done, of far more importance than my getting to the next meal, or watching the next episode on TV, or anything else in life that *I've* determined are job one for *me*.

Men who live on bread alone will die with the bitter realization that nothing they ever could have done to their bodies could have saved them from death. No medical procedure, no miracle food, nothing. Some day, it'll just quit, and then what will they have?

Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down; for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee, and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. "The will to power. Go for it. No ambition, no achievement. No goals, no success. Progress is our most important product. He who hesitates is lost. Go West, young man. The race goes to the swift. Seize the moment. If not now, when?"

How many of you have been slaughtered on the altar of others' expectations of you? You've been so egged on to achievement that you were willing in desperation to make a pair of cardboard wings and jump out of anyone's 10 story window just to prove yourself. "I know you've got it in you. You're so intelligent. So beautiful. You're the smartest in your class. Besides, I *want* you to achieve; I *insist* that you do so! My reputation and honor are at stake. *The angels shall bear thee up*. There'll be a good-paying job awaiting you. Face it, you've got to have a degree these days. You'll be able to pay off your student debts. Trust me!"

How could Jesus ever have resisted the temptation to demonstrate to His people, right there and then, His messiahship, by one extraordinary act of power? Think of the three toilsome years of failed efforts to convince them that would be avoided; the arguments with His foes; the frustrations with His disciples; the constant teaching, teaching, teaching, and the repetition of the same lessons over and over again. And perhaps, even the cross... *Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God*. Will you force God to meet your agenda, simply because you don't want to do things His way? We are never, ever in a position to tell Him what to do.

Not only must you fight your own urge to take the reins, but you must fend off those who would do it for you. Those of us who are older should have mercy on the younger. Be careful next time you feel that temptation coming on. Leave them alone.

Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Now the devil totally tips his hand. This is what he's been after all along. He was thrown out of heaven for desiring the throne of God, but he has never grown tired of seeking it still. This is *an exceeding high mountain* to which he has taken Christ. Check out the view! There's nothing you can't see. Not only is every spot throughout the world available for view simultaneously, but so is every moment of history, and every moment of that which is yet to take place. My oh my! Think of it.

What would that mean for you? No more aches and pains. No more being dragged down by the past, by the nightmares that have been the residue of every abusive circumstance you've endured, by the sad memories of personal failure, of the advantage others have taken of you, and the scars they've left permanently on your soul. You would be instantly transported from victim to victor. Your new perspective, viewed from the highest altitude available, would place all things and all people firmly under your feet.

It is the fantasy that surely every single human being has dared to cultivate, at some point in time. "I'm on top of the world..." To be in such a place to achieve the best destiny imaginable. The only thing is..., there's a price: *if thou wilt fall down and worship me*. How easy it seems. What's wrong with just bowing a little bow to the devil? Lighting up a bit of incense to the emperor? Conceding more and more of our liberties every day to the great god of convenience? Another credit card. Another I.D. Why make so much out of it? What good were all those virtues, anyway? It was a hassle to maintain them, and I don't even know their definitions any more.

Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan; for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Go! Get! Get out of here! I tolerated you this long just to show you and the world how weak and craven you are, but no longer!

Now, friends, which of us has the mettle of Jesus to send the devil packing? He has moved very, very far into our culture. We are so weakened by these very selfsame three temptations, presented to us over and over again, and have witnessed the sadness and tragedy of seeing even our own family members fall to them, that we can barely stand up. That's the reality of things, and there's no getting around it.

So, take a firm grip on the Savior's hand. He is very strong, very sure, and absolutely determined. You see what great battles He's already won on your behalf. Faith is the strength of

that grip of your hand on His. Don't let go. It's upon that very assurance that every single one of our hopes, dreams, and prayers for ourselves, our families, our friends, our state, our nation rests.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.