

MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCES

6. The Mount of Temptation

Matthew 4:1-11

With this year's Summer Sermon Series, Mountaintop Experiences, our goal is to recount a number of the events, recorded in the Bible, which took place on or near the tops of mountains. We want to learn how these events changed God's people and the course of their history, and see what these incidents teach us about God and our relationship to him.

This morning we travel to the Mount of Temptation and witness Jesus engaged in a battle with Satan. Our text is the Gospel lesson. From Matthew chapter 4, we listen to verse 1:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

The Judean desert is a very harsh environment, a rugged, inhospitable landscape, with deep valleys and precipitous cliffs and very little water. Although the desert comes close to the heavily-populated city of Jerusalem, it is sparsely populated even to this day.

Now, there are many commentators who say we just don't know where Jesus and the devil did battle. But within the vast Judean wilderness there is a mountain which is known as the Mount of Temptation. At least since the year 326 AD, and possibly since the time of the Apostles, tradition has said that this is the place where Jesus was tempted by the devil. This location is also known as Mount Quarantania and I have been there. I visited the Mount of Temptation in December of 1998.

Not too many "westerners" have been to the Mount of Temptation in the past decade, because it is located a little over 2 miles northwest of Jericho in the West Bank region of Israel, where westerners are not welcome. There is an old Greek Orthodox monastery called the Monastery of Temptation which is hanging on the side of the mountain about half way to the top. It was built over a cave where Jesus supposedly stayed for the 40 days of his temptation. The mountain is so rugged, it is difficult for even the best of hikers to climb to the monastery. Fortunately there is a mile long cable car system which transports you from an archaeological site outside of Jericho almost 1,000 feet in elevation to the monastery where there is a spectacular view of the city of Jericho, the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

Whether this Mount Quarantania or Mount of Temptation is the actual location of Jesus' battle with Satan is really not our focus, it is the battle itself that we are here to talk about today.

If I were to ask any of our Sunday School students, "What did Jesus do for you?" Most of you would correctly answer, "Jesus died for me." "Jesus died on the cross to pay for my sins." That is wonderfully and blessedly true. Jesus was our substitute. Isaiah 53:5 (NIV), *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.* Jesus died for me.

Because Jesus is True Man with a body and a soul, he could experience death. His soul separated from his body. He died. We call that his 'Passive Obedience.' "*. . . he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!*" (Philippians 2:8 NIV). But because Jesus is also True God, that death was more than sufficient to pay for the sins of the world.

But Jesus didn't only die for you. He lived for you. He is not only your substitute in death, he is also your substitute in life. There is no way any of us could live a life that comes even close to God's standards. God demands perfection. He demands sinlessness. He demands righteousness. Since we are unable to meet God's standards, Jesus came to earth to meet them for us. "*. . . he has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.*" (Hebrews 4:15 NIV). For his entire life, Jesus was actively obeying every one of God's commands. We call that his 'Active Obedience.'

Now, the very moment that the Holy Spirit works faith in your heart, Jesus' sinlessness, his perfection, his righteousness is credited to you by faith. That's how you can stand before a holy and just God someday, credited with (the Apostle Paul says "clothed in") Christ's righteousness. So Jesus not only died for you, he also lived for you. And this fact is especially important when it comes to temptation.

If you have ever fallen into temptation, you need to see how Jesus, your substitute, did what you and I could never do. He perfectly resisted temptation and defeated the Devil. This was an important beginning for Jesus' ministry. It was the beginning of his victories over Satan, victories which eventually culminated in his triumph at the cross and at the empty tomb.

Right after his baptism, the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit led Jesus out into the desert to be tempted by the Devil. The Holy Spirit led Jesus into this situation, and notice what kind of situation this was. Verse 2, "*After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.*" Jesus was physically weakened and experiencing great hunger. But he trusted his Heavenly Father. Fasting is what God the Father wanted him to do. When this time of fasting was over, God the Father will let Jesus know.

That's when the devil shows up with temptation number one: "*If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.*" In other words, Jesus, you don't need to put up with this hunger. You are the Son of God, aren't you? You don't need to trust that your Heavenly Father will take care of you. He hasn't let you eat for a month and half, for cryin' out loud! And you are the Son of God? It doesn't make sense! Do your own thing, Jesus. You have special powers. Use them! Eat! It's silly for you to be starving like this!

This was a very real temptation for Jesus to deal with, to doubt his Heavenly Father's word. And isn't this how Satan tempts us today? He wants to get you to doubt God's Word. Sometimes he tries to get you to doubt what God says about there being a life after death. Sometimes he tries to get you to doubt God's love. "If God really is a God of love why is it that you have cancer, why is it that your loved one died, why is there so much suffering in this world. Seems to me he's not a very loving God at all. If there really is a God, he doesn't seem to have your interests in mind. You don't need to put up with all this grief. You're suffering, for goodness sake. This is when you need to put the Word of God off to the side and look out for yourself. If there really is a God, he will certainly understand."

Look at how Jesus resisted this temptation. He didn't use his powers as the Son of God, and vaporize the Devil. He could have done that. But remember, Jesus was being our substitute. And as our substitute, he fought temptation as every human being would fight temptation. He used the Word of God. *"It is written, 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"* In other words, "I'm not basing what I do on my stomach. Man doesn't live on bread alone. There are other things I'm basing my life on, Satan. I'm basing my life on every word that comes from the mouth of God. My Heavenly Father put me here in this desert to fast, and I'm going to honor that. I'm going to trust him, and his words and his promises."

Jesus quoted from the Bible. He didn't try to reason with the Devil. He didn't check to see what the rest of the world was doing. He didn't base what he did on his feelings of hunger. Instead he fought off the devil with God's Word. Jesus won this victory as our substitute. He won the victory for us.

Then temptation number two came Jesus' way. The Devil took Jesus to the temple, to the very highest point and said, "Jump." Since you trust in God so much, since you trust in God's Word so much, then you should jump! After all, "For it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Why don't you jump and see if God will keep his promise to you, if you are his Son?

This is how the Devil sometimes tempts us too: "Why don't you test God, and see if he really will take care of you. Drive recklessly. Spend your money recklessly. Don't worry about your health. Don't worry about your family, your marriage. Don't plan. God will take care of you, the devil says. Doesn't God say in the Bible that "in all things God will work good"? So why don't you just do what you want? "After all, God is love," right? This is how the Devil tempts us. He quotes from the Bible. He wants to see if he can get us to test God.

Notice how Jesus once again resisted this temptation. Jesus answered him, "It is also written..." Jesus wasn't going to let the Devil take one passage out of the Bible and twist it. "It's also written," Jesus says, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." In other words, "Satan, I'm not going to fall for your trick. I'm not going to believe one part of the Bible, and ignore the rest. Yes, God is love. Yes, everything will work out for my good. Yes, God will take care of me. But the Bible also says, "Don't test God." Don't be reckless. Be careful with your life. No, I'm not going to jump off of this building." Once again, Jesus resisted the Devil, not by relying on his own strength, but by relying on the Word of God. And remember, Jesus was doing this as our substitute. Here we see him once again winning a victory for us.

And then there was temptation number three. The Devil took Jesus to a very high mountain, and in an instant showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. "All this I will give you, he said." Do you see the lie there? Satan was implying that he owned everything. "I'm God," Satan was essentially saying to Jesus. "Look at how all these people are sinning. Obviously, I'm in charge here." Isn't that why you came down here, Jesus, to rescue all these people? To save their souls? You don't need to die to do that. You don't need to sacrifice yourself, or to shed your blood. No. Why would you want to go through all that? Skip the cross. Instead, just bow down and worship me, and I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world, right now."

Doesn't the Devil tempt you this way too? Bow down to me, the devil says, and then you'll be happy. Instead of worshiping God, worship money. Instead of striving to be pure in your life, be immoral. Then you'll be happy. Disrespect authority. Gossip about other people. Never read the Bible. Live like an unbeliever, and then you'll find happiness in your life.

What did Jesus use to ward off this temptation from the Devil? He used the Word of God. Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan. For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Jesus wasn't going to fall for that temptation. He would only bow down to, and only serve his Heavenly Father. Even if that meant dying on a cross. Even if that meant sacrificing his life, shedding his blood, dying a terrible death. I will not take the "easy way out" and follow you, Satan. Away from me!

And so, the Bible tells us, Satan left him, and angels came and attended Jesus. This was God the Father declaring, "The fast is over."

Why did Jesus need to face the Devil this way? Many people read this account and say, "Well, Jesus is teaching us how to fight temptation and win." And there is some truth to that – in this account we learn some valuable lessons about how Satan tempts us. Sometimes he appeals to our physical needs, just as he appealed to Jesus' hunger. Sometimes the Devil quotes from one part of Scripture, and ignores the rest, as we see here. And sometimes the Devil just lies, promising us that our lives will be better and happier if we would just do what he says. You can learn a lot about how the Devil works from studying this part of the Bible.

And you also get some good "tips" on how to fight temptation. Here we learn that the only way to do that is by relying on the Word of God. If you rely on your logic, or if you rely on your feelings, or if you rely on what the rest of the world is doing, you're going to fall into temptation, guaranteed. Relying on the Word of God is the one and only way to resist temptation, and that's something we can learn from this part of the Bible too.

But that's not the primary reason why Jesus had to face Satan in the desert. You see, for there to be any hope for the human race, someone had to perfectly defeat temptation. From the time of Adam and Eve, until today, no one has ever successfully resisted all temptation in his or her life. We've all fallen short. Someone needed to come, and to stand in that desert face to face with Satan, and defeat temptation for us.

And that's what Jesus did. Jesus was crippled with hunger, and armed only with the Bible. Satan hit Jesus with his best shots. But here we see Jesus defeating him, and winning the victory for us .

If you've ever fallen into a temptation in your life, then be comforted in knowing that Jesus, when faced with that same temptation, did not give in. He has stood in your place, and has defeated the Devil for you. And even though you have given in to temptation, Jesus lifts you up and takes you to his Heavenly Father, and says, "Here, accept this believer. I have paid for this person's sin and I have supplied this believer with my sinless obedience, my righteous resistance to temptation so the slate is clean." And so God the Father accepts you for Jesus' sake, because of what He has done for you, because he has lived for you, because he has died for you, because he has won the victory for you. Amen.