

First Sunday in Lent

PUT TO THE TEST

Luke 4:1-13

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' ¹¹and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

12Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 13When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

DIAGNOSIS: Avoiding the Cross

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Cross Avoidance ("No Cross!")*

The divine job of every crosser is to "necessitate" the cross of Jesus Christ. The devilish job of every temptation is to get us to avoid it. The Devil offers good and godly perks without the cross: the gain of life without first losing it. And to the Son of God, who prayed intently in Gethsemane to have his cup of suffering removed, that offer had to be appealing. What pregnant woman wouldn't rather give birth to a child without the labor pains? What cancer patient wouldn't rather be cured without going through chemotherapy? What sinner wouldn't rather enter into God's kingdom without dying to one's sinful self? What savior wouldn't rather win the world without getting nailed upon the cross? Or, do you really think it was so easy for Jesus to sacrifice his life and die? No easier for him than for us.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *A Pathetic Hermeneutic ("No Necessity!")*

Behind all temptations is a pathetic hermeneutic: "It is not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory." The devil is a biblicist, who spits out proof passages with the best of them—"The Bible says...." And heaven only knows there is a devilish bit of biblicist in us all working a host of painful havoc. But Luke says any hermeneutic unhinged from the necessity of Christ's cross is pathetic. A bastardized form of "pathos." Distressingly inadequate. Contemptibly uninteresting. Ludicrously worthless. The very

point Luke drives home in his two unique case studies: the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. They are declared to be “sad,” “foolish,” and “slow to believe all that the prophets have declared!” Those two are stand-ins for each and every human. They are stand-ins for us all.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *On Trial (“No Faithfulness!”)*

It is not just Jesus who is “on trial” in the wilderness—tested to see if he can succeed where Adam and Eve failed... Israel failed...all humanity has failed. Nor, is it just we who are on trial in every temptation we face. We have been tested many times and our faithfulness have been found wanting. No, God is on trial. How odd of Jesus to say to Satan, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test,” when by his unconditional surrender to the cross Jesus does precisely that! Jesus puts that little three-letter Greek word of divine necessity (*dei*) to the test. And should God fail the test or should we fail to see the faithfulness of God in Christ...well then, God is dead and of no use to us except as an imaginary construct, a figment of our imagination, to justify doing whatever we darn well want. This is high-stakes poker. Much is at risk. The defeat of Satan and the rescue of the world depend on it. And up to this point the tempter has been batting 1,000.

PROGNOSIS: Enduring the Cross

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Faithful Witness (“Yes Cross”)*

It is the faithfulness of God that is proven in the faithfulness of Jesus. Promise proven true (despite the world’s hostile attempt to silence and by-pass it). Jesus resists the temptation to avoid the cross and jumps headlong into the jaws of death willingly and obediently, which sets off the promise’s amazing chain reaction: crucifixion, resurrection, exaltation. In the

person of Jesus, God's promise is proven true not in fiction but in fact. Jesus' "No!" to Satan is God's "Yes" to us.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : A Passionate Hermeneutic ("Yes Necessary!")

Of the four evangelists, Luke above all hammers home the passionate cross-necessitating way of reading Scriptures. Added to the three pointed "passion predictions" *before* Christ's crucifixion are three even more resounding "passion confirmations" *after* the resurrection that are *explicitly linked* to the way we read and interpret Scripture. And the end result? "Did not our hearts burn within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" Without a Gospel-proclamation centered on the cross of Christ, the Scriptures remain a closed book, a shut door, locked, bound, chained, padlocked, of no use to us except as a bat to pummel others and justify our prejudices and perversions. Only Christ crucified-and-raised holds the key.

Luke 4 drives three more nails into the necessity of the cross. Had Jesus turn those stones into bread he would have fed himself but not become a life-giving bread, manna from heaven, broken and given for us. Had Jesus subordinately accepted glory from the tempter's hand, he would not have that death-defying grip on us that no one can snatch from his nail-marked hand. Had Jesus thrown himself down, angels undoubtedly could have protected him but certainly would never proclaim him as risen from the dead. This is passion (pathos) in its most genuine sense: God's love for the world in Christ.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Embracing the Cross ("Yes Faithful!")

Embracing the cross of Christ does not make resisting temptation any easier. In fact, if Luke 4 is any indicator, baptism puts a big "X" on our head and heart and makes us the tempter's target

all the more. But we trust that Christ's resistance becomes our own, and we add it to the list in our Great Litany: "By your baptism, fasting and temptation...by your cross and suffering...help us, Lord God." And we do not wield proof passages like a club to beat the opposition down, thrust others off a cliff, and claim glory for ourselves. No, we filter everything through Christ's life, death, and resurrection and enter into the wilderness places of life following in his footsteps and proclaim this saving gospel in an angelic way to help feed, gladden, protect, support, and lift up in loving arms those who struggle with life's exhausting and faith-testing adversities. In short, we go from one who is on trial to being one who is a witness—a faithful witness—to the faithfulness of God.