

SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew

SERMON: **From Coronation to Crucible**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 3:13-4:2

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We come today to two of the most important events in Jesus' life—His baptism and His temptation by Satan in the wilderness. I think it is not accidental that these two events occurred back-to-back. The author is trying to communicate an important truth to us, namely that times of significant victory are often followed by great times of trial and temptation.

There are several causes of this. First, we ourselves help bring it about. When things are going well, we have a tendency to think we have accomplished it on our own. We slack off and put life on cruise control. We think we've got life by the throat because of the big sale, the new birth, the promotion, the advanced degree, but then we let our guard down and become vulnerable to temptation.

But there is another cause, and that is that the Enemy of our souls starts working overtime to trip us up and bring us down. If we're messing up our lives and failing to have any kind of impact for Christ, he doesn't waste valuable resources on us, but if he sees us reaching significant milestones of spiritual growth, he's going to pour the coals on and do his best to trip us up.

You see many examples of this in Scripture. Elijah enjoyed a literal mountaintop experience on Carmel defeating the 400 prophets of Baal, but before the fires on the altar had died out, he was attacked by the Evil One with a threat that overwhelmed him with fear and depression. The Israelites experienced a great victory at Jericho, but it went to their heads. The next stop in their conquest was a tiny little town called Ai, and they were soundly defeated there. Peter preached powerfully in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, with the result that 3,000 people were baptized and added to the church, and then he healed a lame man at the temple gate. But while he continued preaching he was arrested and thrown into prison. Again and again spiritual victory is followed by testing and temptation.

Not surprisingly, Jesus, of whom the author of Hebrews tells us, "He was tempted in all points just as we are," also felt the heat of Satan's crucible immediately after an event of major spiritual significance in His life. Let's read about it in our Scripture text for today, Matthew 3:13-4:2.

Please stand:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. (Matthew 3:13-4:2)

For about thirty years Jesus had lived in relative obscurity in the backwater town of Nazareth in Galilee. But then God raised up a strange prophet as an Advance Team of One to prepare for the inauguration of Jesus as King of Kings, the Messiah of Israel, and the Savior of the World. We noted last Lord's Day that John the Baptizer was preaching repentance and the judgment of God upon sin, and as people came and confessed their sins, John baptized them in the Jordan River.

The focus of John's preaching, however, was not really so much on sinners as it was on the Savior. His purpose was to prepare people for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. He wasn't interested in simply cleaning up bad behavior; he wanted to make people ready for a relationship with the One who was going to introduce the ultimate baptism—baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

John's disciples didn't have to wait long to meet their Messiah, for while John was baptizing people, Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan and requested that John baptize Him. I see the baptism of Jesus as the means God used to inaugurate the earthly ministry of His Son. It was as a kind of coronation of Jesus as the promised King.

Jesus is crowned with the ultimate blessing by His Father.

He is baptized by John. “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.” The baptism of Jesus seems like a fairly simple, straightforward event, but it is fraught with difficult theological issues. We simply cannot gloss over it quickly. First, let's consider the facts as we know them. John is baptizing those who repent in the Jordan River near the town of Bethany. This is not the Bethany near Jerusalem, which was the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus; rather it is a Bethany in the Jordan Valley in what is now the country of Jordan. We don't know how long John has been preaching, but we do know from Luke's account that he started “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” (Luke 3:1). The best scholarship puts the date at about A.D. 29, putting both John and Jesus in their early 30's.

When Jesus arrives from Galilee requesting to be baptized, John recognizes Him immediately. After all, they are cousins, with John older by about six months. Some three decades earlier Jesus' mother Mary had stayed with John's mother Elizabeth for three months while both women were pregnant. It was revealed to both before Jesus' birth that Mary's child would be the Messiah. But Elizabeth was also told by the Angel of the Lord that her own son would one day have the task of preparing the Way for Mary's son. It is inconceivable to me that Elizabeth would have withheld this information from John as he was growing up, so I suspect he was fully aware of his own destiny and also aware that Jesus had an even greater destiny.

When Jesus arrives at the Jordan and requests to be baptized, John's immediate reaction is to vigorously object, suggesting that Jesus has it backwards: John is the one who needs to be baptized by Him. And frankly, it's hard to argue with John's perspective. After all, the focus of

John's baptism is on confession of sin and repentance, and Jesus has no sin to confess or to repent of. In fact, in John 1:29 the Baptizer refers to Jesus as "the lamb of God who *takes away* the sin of the world." Why should the One who takes away sin submit Himself to a ceremony representing repentance and cleansing from sin?

I find it interesting that John resists baptizing Jesus for exactly the opposite reason that he refuses to baptize the religious leaders of Israel—the Pharisees and the Sadducees? They were sinful and unrepentant, and therefore unworthy of baptism. Jesus was sinless and therefore, in John's understanding, too worthy for it.

Well, why *does* Jesus (who certainly is even more aware of His own sinlessness than John is) want to be baptized? Scores of reasons have been offered by theologians down through the centuries, and most miss the mark considerably, in my humble opinion. I think the answer has to be found in Jesus' own response to John's reluctance: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Whatever that means, it makes sense to John, for the next words are, "Then John consented."

I just wish it were as clear to *us* what Jesus meant when he said, "to fulfill all righteousness." I think He is acknowledging, first of all, that John's standard of righteousness is valid and that baptism is God's way for sinners to demonstrate repentance. But Jesus accepts baptism for Himself, not because He is sinful but because He wants to identify with sinners. In the great 53rd chapter of Isaiah, the prophet wrote of Messiah that he "was numbered with the transgressors." He was not a transgressor Himself, but was to be numbered with them.

Jesus' baptism represents the willing identification of the sinless Son of God with the sinful people He came to save. He who has no sin takes His place among those who have no righteousness. The Savior of the world takes His place among the sinners of the world. Paul puts it this way in 2 Cor. 5:21: "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." There was no other way to fulfill all righteousness.ⁱ

Jesus' baptism is not only a symbol of His identity with sinners; it is also a preview of His death, burial, and resurrection. In fact, twice He Himself uses the term "baptism" to describe the events of the last week of His life. Not long before His final trip to Jerusalem He tells His disciples, "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!" (Luke 12:50). On another occasion James and John ask to be given the top positions in the Kingdom, and Jesus responds, "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). Jesus' water baptism is a preview of His death, burial, and resurrection, just as our baptism pictures our own death to sin and being raised to newness of life.

By the way, before I move on I think it would be appropriate to comment briefly on a very controversial issue in the church today—i.e., the form that baptism should take. I believe that immersion was used with John's disciples, with Jesus, and with every NT baptism we know of.

This seems evident, first of all, from the language that is used (Verse 16 reads, “He went up out of the water,” which only makes sense if He first went down into it, which was only necessary if He was going to be immersed. We’re also told in John 3:23 that John’s custom was to baptize where “there was much water,” which would have been pointless unless immersion was being practiced. Only a little water is needed for sprinkling.

Second, the very meaning of the word “baptism” is literally “to dip” an object into water, not to pour water onto it. Third, immersion best pictures the essential meaning of baptism, which is identification—for Jesus it was identification with sinners; for us it is identification with Jesus in His death burial and resurrection.

And finally, immersion was almost certainly the practice of the early church. The Church of England did not begin sprinkling until 1645. The Eastern Orthodox church has never permitted any mode of baptism but immersion, even though they practice infant baptism (the infants are fully immersed three times). Why, then, do most denominations today (Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, etc.) practice sprinkling rather than immersion? Well, I’m not sure. It’s certainly easier and less humiliating. But isn’t it possible that humbling ourselves is part of what God intended in the process?

While I don’t think the amount of water that is used is the most important thing in baptism, I see no good reason for departing from the precedent set by the NT and the early church, which was clearly baptism by immersion.ⁱⁱ

He is anointed by the Holy Spirit. At the moment Jesus comes out of the river, we read, “heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.” The confirming sign that the Spirit is coming upon Jesus is a dove, or something like a dove.

Why is a sign needed? Well, it is needed for the sake of John and the disciples of John, because the Holy Spirit is a spirit—He does not have a body, so He cannot be seen. The dove is a visible sign that an invisible but powerful presence is coming upon Jesus.

Why a dove? To the Jewish mind of that day a dove was associated with sacrifice. Bulls were sacrificed by the rich, and lambs by the middle class, but the majority could only afford a dove. I think it is also significant that a dove is white and gentle, representing the purity and gentleness of God’s Spirit.

Why an anointing? If Jesus is already God, why does He need to be anointed? Certainly not for His own sake; rather for the sake of those to whom He came to minister. They know him as a man—an unusual man, to be sure. But they probably do not yet know Him as the Son of God and Savior of the world. The Holy Spirit anoints Him to set Him apart, to validate His ministry and destiny as Messiah and Savior.

He is affirmed by the Father. In verse 17 the appearance of the dove is accompanied

by a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Isn’t it strange how men often struggle at telling their children, “I love you.” God has no hesitancy in expressing His love for His Son, or for any of us, for that matter. But I want to focus for a minute on that term “well-pleased.” I believe it is an evaluation of the character of Jesus, but even more of the purpose for which He came.

For centuries, even millennia, God had required that people deal with their sins through offering blood sacrifices. The killing of an animal was meant to underline the seriousness of the offense and to impress upon the worshiper that sin always results in death. The animal is only a temporary substitute for the sinner himself, because no OT sacrifice ever accomplished the forgiveness of sin; it only provided a temporary covering for them. That’s what the OT term “atonement” means—a covering for sin. The author of Hebrews makes this distinction clear: “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” No matter how flawless a lamb might be, it was still imperfect, and therefore it could not be totally pleasing to God.

But the sacrifice Jesus came to make on the Cross would be that of “a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:19). Thus God could say He was well-pleased with Jesus. Hebrews summarizes this way,

*Every priest goes to work at the altar each day, offers the same old sacrifices year in, year out, and never makes a dent in the sin problem. As a priest, Christ made a single sacrifice for sins, and that was it! Then he sat down right beside God and waited for his enemies to cave in. It was a perfect sacrifice by a perfect person to perfect some very imperfect people. (Hebrews 10:11-14, *The Message*).*

That’s ultimately why God says of Jesus, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

I am glad Jesus chose to be baptized. He set an example of obedience. He doesn’t ask me to do something He isn’t willing to do. And that simple truth, sort of hidden in the baptism story, explodes into the open in the following story, the story of His temptation, for there, too, He doesn’t ask me to do something He isn’t willing to do—i.e., confront temptation and refuse to yield.

The very next words after God’s thundering coronation speech from heaven are these: “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.” Mark states the timing in an even more startling fashion: “At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert” (Mark 1:12). The waters of baptism had hardly dried from His clothes when Jesus was tempted by Satan.

Jesus is confronted with the ultimate temptation by Satan.

I call this experience for Jesus “going from the coronation to the crucible.” You know what a crucible is? It’s a vessel, generally made of porcelain, that is used to heat metals or certain chemicals to a very high temperature in order to purify them. The crucible became known as a symbol of severe testing. Jesus is being tested in this passage. He is placed in a crucible of circumstances, and the fire is turned up white hot. And like first-year chemistry students, we get

to observe the amazing results.

But why is this necessary? Well, if Jesus is going to be the redeemer of mankind, then He must be tested and found adequate. If Jesus is going to become an effective advocate and sympathetic high priest for His people, then He must know by *experience* the temptations we face and show us by *example* that it is possible for us to resist rather than yield.

But aren't you surprised by the opening words of chapter 4? "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil."

He is led into the desert by the Holy Spirit. Isn't that a disturbing thought—Jesus led by the Holy Spirit into a situation that will tempt him to live outside the boundaries of God's will? What are we supposed to do with that? And how does it square with the teaching of the Apostle James to the effect that . . . "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed" (James 1:13, 14)? It sounds like James is trying to remove God from any responsibility for temptation, while Matthew is placing the responsibility squarely on God's plate.

These are difficult questions, but at least part of the answer is found in the fact that the term translated here "tempt" has a much broader meaning in the original Greek of the NT. The same word is often translated in our English Bibles as "test." Whether a certain situation is a temptation or a test depends upon the context and even upon the motive of the one instigating it. In fact, the very same event can be a temptation and a test at the same time.

There is no doubt that the Devil saw this situation as an opportunity to tempt Jesus, to entice Him to do evil, to violate His character, and to undermine His entire mission. But the Holy Spirit saw the same event as an opportunity to test Jesus, to validate His character, to establish His credentials, and to defeat the Evil One. In summary, God doesn't tempt but He does test. His goal is not to see us fall but to see us stand and grow.

But is this a real temptation, like the kind I face? After all, Jesus is God and therefore perfect. How can a perfect person experience a temptation to sin? Well, Jesus is certainly God, but He is also human. And lest anyone think this temptation is contrived or phony, I want you to note several factors that make it clear that this a real crucible with a real fire.

He is alone and hungry. For nearly six weeks, Jesus is alone in the desert. The Devil loves to isolate us, because he knows that when we are alone, it is easy for us to take moral or financial short cuts, to take spiritual holidays, or to have a secret conversation. There is safety in numbers, in accountability, in the support of friends; that's why Jesus Christ established the Church—to provide that safety net.

Jesus is also hungry. Matthew tells us that He fasts for forty days and forty nights. Talk about hunger! I've probably never been really hungry in my life. Oh, I say I'm hungry from time to time, like several times a day. But most of the time I eat because it's time to eat, not because I'm

hungry. I suspect the same is true for most of you. But there are other kinds of hunger in our lives that Satan also loves to exploit:

there's the hunger for affirmation,
the hunger for significance,
the hunger for belonging,
the hunger for security,
the hunger for intimacy.

Sometimes we allow these legitimate hungers to be met in illegitimate ways, and in the process we invite temptation and put ourselves at risk.

Every once in a while you read about some Christian leader going on a forty-day fast, but I don't think Jesus' isolation and 40 day fast in the wilderness is mentioned to us as something we should emulate. This is a unique event in the life of Jesus, a time when God stretches His Son almost to the breaking point. He wants to be sure that no one can say that Jesus had it easy or was handled with kid gloves. He throws the book at Him so that when He emerges victorious His credentials are indisputable. And that brings us to the third issue that makes this an ultimate temptation:

He faces a supernatural adversary. There are actually three different primary sources of temptation that face us—the world, the flesh and the devil. The world—and I'm thinking of the world-system, not the mountains, the valleys, the rivers, etc.—the world we live in is not friendly toward the things of God; in fact, it is hostile toward God, so our very culture is a source of temptation. You can see it in entertainment, in advertising, in marketing, in politics, even in organized religion. We are going to be tempted merely by engaging the world around us.

But even hermits are not exempt from temptation, because the flesh is another source. By flesh I mean our bodies, but also our souls, our humanness. We have hormones, drives, appetites, and needs that sometimes go against our best good and against God's standards. I hate to fill you in on an ugly little secret that you will never learn from the New York Times or network TV, but people are not basically good. Dennis Prager in an article in *Jewish World Review* argues:

No great body of wisdom, East or West, ever posited that people were basically good. This naive and dangerous notion originated in modern secular Western thought, probably with Jean Jacques Rousseau, the Frenchman who gave us the notion of pre-modern man as a noble savage.

He was half right. Savage, yes, noble, no.ⁱⁱⁱ

Many temptations arise from the flesh, from our own hearts.

The third source of temptation is supernatural—the Devil himself. Two extremes must be avoided when it comes to the Devil. Many people live in ignorance or denial of a personal Devil. They believe that references to Satan and demons are from the realm of myth and legend. On the other hand, others seem to believe Satan is behind every calamity in their life. They are constantly rebuking, binding or casting out Satan or blaming him for their sin when instead they ought to be taking greater responsibility for their actions. These need to understand that unlike God, the Devil is not omniscient, omnipotent or omnipresent. He must work through a limited number of fallen angels that the Bible calls demons. Because of this, I suspect few of our temptations are directly from him, though we may experience the disruptive work of his demons.

But Jesus is *personally* attacked by the Devil. Satan doesn't delegate this job to demons; he doesn't sit back and rely on the world-system to trip Jesus up; he isn't satisfied to let isolation and hunger do its number on Jesus. He attacks personally and with the full force of the most potent weapons at his disposal.

This morning we do not have time to examine the details of how Jesus resisted Satan's temptation. That we will save for next Lord's Day. But I trust I am not ruining the suspense of the story by telling you He passed the test, He was victorious. That's important before I ask you the "So what?" question that I want to conclude with today. Unless the major value in this story is just to fill in an historical gap in the biography of Jesus, we need to ask the question, "What does all this have to do with me? Is there really any encouragement available to us from the fact that King Jesus experienced (and survived) the crucible of temptation? After all, He was the infinite, perfect Son of God and we are finite, sinful human beings."

The book of Hebrews claims that the temptation of Jesus does have a *profound* application to us. Listen to Hebrews 2:17-18:

(Jesus) had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

This experience in the desert was necessary in order for Jesus to fulfill His role as a merciful and faithful high priest. How could He empathize with my struggles and come to my aid if he had never experienced what I experience? As a matter of fact, He experienced *more* than I will ever experience—far more. A couple of chapters later Hebrews addresses the same theme and then adds the answer to our question, "So what?":

*Now that we know what we have—Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God—let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help. (Hebrews 4:14-16, *The Message*).*

Look at that phrase, "experienced it all—all but the sin." The NIV puts it this way: "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin." Do you believe that? Sometimes we get all tied up in philosophical arguments about whether Jesus merely did not sin or possibly could not sin. If He could not sin, then, of course, that calls into question whether the temptation was real and powerful. I find it interesting that four different times the NT tells us that Jesus *did* not sin; not once does it say He *could not* sin. He didn't sin, not because He couldn't but because He just didn't. I think we must accept that it was no less difficult for Jesus to face temptation after a major victory than it is for you and me. It was no less difficult for Him to resist temptation than it is for us. Whatever you're facing, Jesus has already been there.

So trust Him. He's there for you. Especially do I urge you to trust Him after a major victory, when the Evil One is going to be particularly on the prowl. I think of us as a family of believers

here at First Free. We have just experienced an amazing victory in seeing our debt paid off and experiencing the financial provision of God beyond our wildest imagination. Are we going to let our guard down? Have we made the mistake somehow of thinking we did this on our own? If so, we are probably in for a rude awakening. I fully expect that the Enemy is going to yank our chain in the near future. How does God want us to prepare for the inevitable tests that lie ahead in our corporate life, or in our individual lives?

I hope to offer you some very practical help next Lord's Day when we talk about "*Getting Victory Over Temptation*," but there's nothing more important than reiterating the message of Hebrews 4: "let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help." He died for you—to provide forgiveness of your sins, and He lives for you—to enable you to find victory.

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- i. Some of the thoughts in this paragraph were borrowed from John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 78.
 - ii. MacArthur, 79.
 - iii. Dennis Prager, <http://Jewishworldreview.com/0103/prager.html>.