

“In Trials, Truth Prevails” based on Matthew 4:1-11 and Psalm 32

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, February 26, 2023, Shelby Presbyterian Church

In the 1995 movie, “The Usual Suspects,” there is a line that has always stuck with me for these nearly 30 years. In the search for a shadowy mastermind named Kaiser Soze, whom no one has seen, the police are interviewing a man named “Verbal” to gather information. Toward the end of the interview, the police are skeptical about Soze, and whether or not he is a mastermind or even a real person. And so, Verbal says, “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled, was convincing the world that he did not exist.”

In our modern culture, familiar texts like ours today, when Jesus is tempted by Satan, are often hard for us to understand, because we get caught up on the Satan character. *Is there really* a personified being who met Jesus in the wilderness to test him? Because of medieval portrayals of a character with red horns and a pitchfork, many of which included some pretty awful anti-Semitic tropes, we rightly resist this comical and offensive portrayal of Satan. This resistance leads to thinking of Satan as a metaphor, a representation of the evil we know is real.

Meanwhile, many Christians reject the metaphor, and not only believe there is a literal devil, but that it is a great power in opposition to the goodness of God. Therefore, this being is at war with God. After all, there is a lot of biblical reference to warfare, especially spiritual warfare. Yet, this embracing of Satan as real and a force of opposition against God, leads to thinking of this personified being as the source of all evil, who wages war against the source of all that is good.

Our desire to explain away evil we don’t understand causes us to use the devil as the worthy adversary of God, which tempts us to embrace the heresy of “dualism.” This heresy sees good and evil as evenly matched, and thus, God has an archenemy, until God will finally prevail.

C.S. Lewis addresses these two views of Satan in his book, “The Screwtape Letters.” The book contains fictional letters from “Screwtape,” a senior demon, to his nephew, a tempter named “Wormwood,” who is attempting to send “the Patient” to hell. In the preface to his friend and fellow writer, J.R.R. Tolkien, Lewis writes, *“There are two equal and opposite errors”* we make about devils. *“One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both.”*

In other words, the greatest tricks the devil ever pulled was to convince us he isn’t real, and also to convince us that he has more power than he really does. Either way, he wins.

Scripture portrays Satan or the devil, both as a real spiritual being, and, also, as a metaphor for the force of general evil in this world. However, this being is not evenly matched with God, an archenemy, but is the enemy of humankind, whom we wrongly empower. We empower this being or force when we turn our backs from God, and let it make us give in to temptation, tell us what to do, and worse, lie about who we really are.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke each tell the story of Jesus going to the wilderness to be tested. Matthew says the Holy Spirit led him there, Luke says the Holy Spirit brought him there, and Mark says the Holy Spirit threw him there, but in all three it is God's action. It's the Spirit. In Mark, it is Satan who tempts. In Luke, it's the devil. In Matthew, it's both. Mark uses the Hebrew name, which means 'accuser' or 'adversary,' while Matthew and Luke use a Greek word, '*diabolos*,' which means literally, "the one who throws through." This is the one who divides. The devil is the divider.

Mark doesn't tell us the three tests. Matthew and Luke use all three but rearrange their order. In all accounts, Jesus in his humanity is starved. Low blood sugar and starvation depletes any human being's willpower. And yet, Jesus is also fully divine, the eternal and only begotten Son of God, so of course, he wins. So, what then is the point here? Could he have failed? Why does this matter? These three questions are what we will attempt to answer today.

The point is that Jesus is both the embodiment of the people of Israel, and of all humanity. The Spirit leads, brings and throws him into the wilderness to reveal this for us. In the Garden of Eden, where the story tells us the first humans had every single advantage – God was with them, they had all the food they could eat and a tree which would let them live forever. The serpent, who is actually never named as Satan or a devil, still convinces them that God is holding something back – the knowledge of good and evil. And rather than asserting their God-given role, and the authority they had over all things, they listened to the lies.

At a tree, they sought their own empowerment, when God had empowered them already. You see the message of the Garden is not simply a fall, a mistake, a sin to begin all sin, but it is the giving up of the dominion that God had already granted human beings. Made in God's image, humanity was made to rule, or care, for the garden. The garden is where heaven and earth are joined together – the creation and spiritual realms. But they believed the lie that they did not have this power, and rather than listening to God, gave up their power, to a serpent telling them these lies.

Eden represents the order God desires with human beings as image bearers in charge. Human beings were made in God's image with the power to love and with freedom – the freedom to represent God – and have dominion over all things given by God. But in this freedom, the story tells us that it is endemic to human nature: We rebel, giving up our freedom, in submission to creation.

This is not a situation where the Good God did one thing and was thwarted by an evil god. This is a situation where the good God gave, and continues to give to all of humanity, the most precious aspect of who God is – starting with the power of sovereignty or choice – and they used that choice, as each of us often do, to become subjects. I preach to myself here when I say we give up our freedom and become beholden to a part of creation, whether it is wealth and

comfort, popularity and pleasure, or knowledge and power to decide right from wrong. We reject God's empowering presence.

When we sin, we turn away from God and in effect, turn away from who we were made to be. We create systems meant for good, but which are structurally sinful anyway, because they divide and degrade. We make individual choices based on the lie that tells us we are incomplete, and need to claim power, wealth, success, prowess and more and more, to prove we are stronger, smarter, and better than everyone else, even God.

And so, we ask, *could Jesus fail?* If in this moment we are supposed to focus on his humanity, I believe that he could have, but I also believe that this was never really possible. These contradict. How can I hold these together? I hold these two contradictory ideas together because we bear God's image. From the beginning, we have been called to share in God's life and identity. In this, the angels and so also the demons have no power over us, except that which we give them, or which God permits. In his humanity, Jesus has the dominion given in Eden. In his humanity, he does what we cannot do. He exercises that authority in humility because in his divinity, he has become like us.

So then, why does this story matter for us? How does this story aid us in our journey? To complete the picture, let's look at the tests, and how Jesus answered them. The first leans into the devil using something that is true, to create a lie. "If you are the Son of God, speak up," and make these stones into bread. It is true, that Jesus is the Son of God, and this is in his power to do. The devil wants to divide Jesus, separate him from his purpose. He wants him to feel insecure in who he is. There would be nothing wrong with Jesus making bread and eating. But Satan wants him to doubt his identity, or at least perform a miracle to prove it.

There is nothing wrong with us working hard and making money, or using power for good, and nothing wrong with living a life that makes us popular and attractive to others. However, we do not need these things to prove our value before others or our value before God. Yet, we think our wealth is part of our identity, that power is ours to wield, and our popularity or sex appeal, make us worthy of admiration. We do not live on these things in the created order, but our life and worth is in every word from God's mouth.

You matter. You have value. You are loved. Not because of what you possess, can do, or have accomplished, but because you belong to God individually and communally, as God's word reveals from page one to the end. The gospel is God's means to unite every beloved image bearer in Christ. Yet, we let things that do not have any bearing on our real identity, have power over us and use them to define and divide us. Jesus rejects the lie about his identity and defeats the divider.

In the second test, Jesus is placed at the highest point of the temple, above God's dwelling, and Satan at the bottom tells him that he should jump, because as it is written in Psalm 91, "to his angels, he will give orders concerning you, and in their hands, they will lift you up, so you never

strike your foot against a stone,” meaning to trip or stumble. The devil again uses a partial truth, attempting to exploit insecurity. These are the same tools ascribed to the serpent in the Garden of Eden. But in quoting the Psalm, he leaves something out. The command to the angels concerning him, is to “guard you in all your ways.” The command is to help the king, to remain on God’s path.

The Satan is trying to divide Jesus from his purpose, take him from the path, the devil misuses scripture. Jesus says, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test,” a double meaning here, because he speaks first to his own decision not to jump, and to warn the devil, who in this moment is putting the Lord in Christ to the test.

For us, how often do we use the promises of God as an excuse for what we really want? Often, we are tempted to give up our role in God’s purpose, our keeping of God’s ways. Often, we use scripture to excuse our actions, like taking a verse out of its context, to justify our decisions to take more than we need or manipulate others.

Sometimes, we act like believers are above nonbelievers, yet paradoxically persecuted by them. In all of these cases, we test God, and test God’s grace and mercy for us. God’s presence is meant to bring people together, not to divide, because when we know we are loved and that we are known by God, plus when we know God is with us, we are then empowered to love without fear of losing anything, even our lives.

In the last test, the devil transports Jesus to a high mountain to look at the world’s kingdoms, and offers to give them all to Jesus, asserting his power over the world. In this one, perhaps it would make sense that Jesus would easily reject it, after all, if he is the Son of God, then don’t these already belong to him? But notice that the devil does not address Jesus as Son of God here.

It is in the crucifixion that Jesus is enthroned later as King, and so the devil is offering him the easy way out. The devil is saying, be like the world and take this. Just give agree to serve, or worship, me. The devil says essentially, “I won’t make you remain a human being, who is subject to death, or suffering. I give only power.” Of course, this power is not really his to give, as every human who has sought and been given this power – from Rome’s emperors to Hitler, in between, before and beyond, all have failed.

You see, God’s ways are higher, and Jesus knows that it is in humility, submission to God alone, that real power is achieved, and it does not come through earthly domination. The people of Israel tried this when they sought kings like neighboring nations, and their kings did only evil in the sight of the Lord, exploiting the people. The failed and false messiahs of Jesus’s time tried this too, but God is different.

God humbly shared in our human limits, our human flesh, not to exploit us, but to be obedient to our humanity, and to God's ways, even to the point of death, death on cross, but only to rise again, so that we might share his life, empowered by his Spirit.

My sisters and brothers, too often we are tempted in this world to take the easy way out. We seek power and authority to compel others to do something or act a certain way, rather than joining them in their suffering, to love and care for them. Jesus says, "Depart Satan," but this is not merely a "go away," but the Greek depicts a reversal of power, literally "leave under me." Indeed, Jesus says, you are not in power over me, for I say, "Depart."

My sisters and brothers, it does not matter if the devil is the person or evil a force, because the devil is real. There is division in this world and becomes real because sin is real and we see the pain, misery, it causes. Yet, the devil does not have any actual power over us, and we can reject evil, not by pretending it doesn't exist but remembering that God is with us. Jesus has already defeated sin and death on the cross, overturning the world.

Remember the tree where they made their decision in the Garden of Eden. So it is also at a tree again, in a reversal, with one cut down and used for death on a cross, that Jesus reclaims the purpose of humanity, revealing God's love for us. Like Jesus, we have the power then, to tell evil, "depart."

In our trials, this is the truth that wins out, that our value is not in the things of this world, but our value comes from God's love for humanity and love for each of us individually, desiring for us to be humble and faithful like Jesus, faithfully seeking unity in him. We do not need worldly power and domination to change the world, but only the humility to confess our sin, our rebellion (or transgressions) as the Psalmist said, and serve only the Lord our God, by loving and serving others.

Beloved, do not be afraid to find your identity in Jesus, and do not give power to the things of this world. It's easier said than done, but do not be afraid to love for he is with you. In every trial you face, even death, remember his presence because he is the truth that will prevail. Amen.