

Date: February 19, 2023  
 Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11  
 Series: *God's Grand Story*  
 Title: *"Showdown in the Desert"*

In the summer of 1846, a party of 89 emigrants in Conestoga wagons headed west along the 2,170-mile-long Oregon Trail. They were tired and hungry. Plus, they were trailing behind schedule. If they didn't pick up the pace, winter would come while they were crossing the Rockies. So when they arrived at Fort Bridger, Wyoming they decided to take a shortcut known as the "*Hastings Cutoff*." It was named after a Lansford Hastings, who claimed would shave at least 300 miles off the journey---cutting more than a month's time off their trip---but things didn't work out that way.

Hastings Cutoff turned out to be a waterless, wide-open stretch of the Great Salt Lake Desert, that Hastings himself had never actually traveled. He simply looked at a map of the route that settler John C. Fremont had taken in 1845 across the Great Salt Lake Desert. Hastings then wrote a guidebook which said it would be quicker and easier than the standard trail. What Hastings didn't realize was that Fremont almost died taking this route.

By the time these emigrants---the Donner-Reed party---finally reached the Sierra Nevada mountains, the "shortcut" had cost them weeks. Snow fell, trapping the travelers and you probably know the rest of the story. When members of the party began starving to death, survivors ate their remains to stay alive.

This is tragic proof that shortcuts, supposedly easier ways of doing something, have often produced disastrous results.

Today we are continuing what we started last week with a sermon series called "*God's Grand Story*." And this first message is focused on the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry when Satan tempted Him with shortcuts. Take your Bibles and open them to Matthew 4.

Follow along as I read verses 1-11 and if able let's all stand in respect for God's Word as it is read.

Matthew 4:1-11

- 1 - Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.**
- 2 - After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry.**
- 3 - The tempter came to Him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."**
- 4 - Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every Word that comes from the mouth of God.'"**
- 5 - Then the devil took Him to the holy city and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple.**
- 6 - "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw Yourself down. 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.'"**
- 7 - Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"**
- 8 - Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.**
- 9 - "All this I will give You," he said, "if You will bow down and worship me."**
- 10 - Jesus said to him, "Away from Me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'"**
- 11 - Then the devil left Him, and angels came and attended Him.**

The Bible tells us a lot about Satan---but I would just remind you of one thing. He is our enemy, and he prowls around like a lion looking for someone's life to ruin. In his prowling Satan tempts us to break away from our part of God's grand story. He tempts us to go his way instead of His way.

Experience has taught us that every time we yield to his temptations, lives are hurt---ours and the ones we love. We can even cause harm to our church---and as we have seen in the example of too many famous pastors and parachurch leaders---we can even cause people to turn from the Gospel.

So, it's vitally important that we dig deep into this text---so we can learn how to become the kind of person who can withstand Satan's temptations. My hope and prayer is that this will help us all find the strength to live out our part in God's Grand story---when Satan tries to divert us.

Okay, here's the setting of our text.

Just prior to these 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus was baptized by his half-cousin, John. It was a glorious event. The Holy Spirit descended like a dove. God spoke saying, ***"This is My Son in Whom I am well-pleased."*** (Matthew 3:17) It is one of the few times all three persons of the Trinity are in one place at the same time. And it was suiting for each to be present because it marked Jesus' commissioning for public ministry. But surprisingly, instead of coming up out of the water and launching a teaching tour filled with miracles, Luke's account says:

***"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was LED by the Spirit into the desert, where for forty days He was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them He was hungry."*** (4:1-2).

This desert wilderness lies between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. The Old Testament calls this area *"Jeshimmon,"* which means *"the Devastation,"* and after having seen it myself, I would say this is a fitting name. It stretches over an area of thirty-five by fifteen miles and the ground itself is contorted, ridges run in all directions as if they were warped or twisted. The hills are like dust heaps; the limestone is blistered and peeling, rocks are bare and jagged. The whole area glows and shimmers with heat like some vast furnace. Even to this day as one drives through or flies over this region, it appears to be forsaken by man and God. In comparing these two events: Jesus' baptism and temptation, R. Kent Hughes put it well when he said, *"Heaven opened at one and Hell yawned open at the other."*

Now, as Terry said last week, if we are going to fully understand the NEW Testament part of God's grand story, we have to be familiar with the OLD Testament part. And that principle definitely applies to this morning's text. For example, Jesus' story begins the same way the human story began in Genesis, with a temptation by Satan. Remember? After Adam and Eve had been blessed by God, Satan showed up in the form of a serpent and the rest is long, sad, painfilled history. Luke chapter 3 contains the genealogy of Jesus, and the last line in that genealogy tells us that Jesus was the son of Adam, the son of God. So, Jesus is a Second Adam. Comparing these two temptations, a person beginning to read today's text might wonder if Jesus' temptation would end the same as it did for the FIRST Adam. Thankfully, it didn't.

Here's another OT/NT parallel. Jesus faced His temptation in the wilderness. What else happened in the wilderness? The nation of Israel wandered in a wilderness as well. Remember how God used Charlton Heston---I mean MOSES---to lead Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea, across the wilderness to the very threshold of the Promised Land? What happened? They yielded to the kind of temptation FEAR brings us---the temptation NOT to trust God to enable us to do things that are beyond our strength. They refused to enter the Promised Land and because of that they wandered in the wilderness not 40 days---but 40 years.

Well, in His wilderness wanderings Jesus had a choice to follow God's leading or to turn back. So---Jesus' ministry begins with sort of a reenactment---a redo---of Israel's desert wanderings.

After thousands of years of humiliation at the hands of a bully named Satan, Jesus came back to show us how to do what that generation of Hebrews failed to do---live out OUR part of God's grand story.

Too many heroes of the Old Testament show us that as fallen human beings we can't do this on our own. Jesus came to help us by showing us how to do it---how to win in our own battles with Satan and his minions.

So, with no further ado, let's take a closer look at this showdown in the wilderness that began our Lord's earthly ministry. First, I want us to notice how vulnerable Jesus was. He was physically depleted. He didn't eat anything for 40 days. So, like any human being He was HUNGRY.

Our text shows that this part of God's Grand Story wasn't just a legend created by the early church, because it emphasizes the humanity of Jesus. And that's important because there has always been a tendency among to strip away

His humanity and make Him completely unreal. Songs are written about Jesus containing lines such as *"The little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes"* as if crying was a sin. That's how some people think of Jesus. In their minds He was so divine that He never drove a crooked nail while working in Joseph's carpentry business. When He stubbed His toe, He never hobbled around in pain yelling, *"OUCH!!! God---that HURTS!"*

Jesus wasn't like that. He is God become fully human---so like us---after forty days with no food He was HUNGRY. I read this week that when you have no food you want some so bad---but only for the first week. Then that hunger kind of fades away. But on the 40<sup>th</sup> day it comes back with a vengeance. It's as if the body is saying, *"Feed me NOW or you are going to die!"* Satan tempts us at the same times---when we are vulnerable because we are physically depleted, tired, hungry---exhausted.

But Jesus wasn't just hungry; he was also alone. None of His first followers went with Him. And that was the plan. Before He began His ministry, Jesus needed time to Himself. Perhaps this is why the Spirit of God led Him to spend 40 days in this wilderness. It was the best place to BE alone. In those times when we face our own crucial decisions, what we need most is to be alone with God---time to STOP doing and START thinking and praying. I think that most of the mistakes we make in life might never happen if we learned to stop and give ourselves a chance to be alone with our Heavenly Father---time to pray and even fast, time to "look" at things from His perspective.

Jesus went to this desolate place so that He could prepare Himself to begin the task that had been His since the foundation of the world. It was RIGHT for Him to go there---but His experience is a reminder of the fact that we are most vulnerable to temptation when we isolate ourselves from other people. People who travel for work will tell you they become vulnerable when they are away from home, when no one is watching.

So, this was an important---but dangerous---moment for Jesus in God's Grand Story.

In this time of solitude---when Jesus was physically depleted---Satan pounced. He tempted Jesus in three different ways--the same "shortcut ways" He tempts you and me. So---how does Satan tempt us to go HISSS way? Before we continue, I want to let you know that I am indebted to Bryan Wilkerson for the outline this morning.

But back to the question: HOW DOES SATAN TEMPT?

**(1) He tempts us to HAVE SOMETHING we're not meant to HAVE.**

Look back at verses 3-4 of our text where it says, *"The tempter came to Him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every Word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

Satan tempted Jesus with the most basic and immediate need—food. Is there anything wrong with food, with eating bread when we're hungry? Of course not. It's just not what God had in mind for Jesus at that particular moment. After all, Jesus was fasting. He was abstaining from food so as to focus on---FASTEN on to--God. It was not time for Him to eat bread. Satan will tempt us along those same lines—to have things we're not meant to have, or to have them when we are not meant to have them. Sometimes he tempts US with food—too much food, the wrong kind of food, food for ourselves instead of food for the hungry. But he can tempt us to have just about anything—a newer car, cooler technology, nicer clothes---the latest fashion.

I'm reminded of the story about a woman who came home one day with an extremely expensive dress. When her husband learned how much it cost he went ballistic and said, *"Honey what were you thinking? You know we can't afford that!"* The wife replied, *"I know. I didn't plan to buy the thing; it's just that the Devil made me do it."*

Anyone thinking of Flip Wilson?

The husband said, *"The Devil?"* *"That's right."* Said the woman. *"I was trying on clothes in that store and the devil said to me, 'My dear, I've never seen you look more gorgeous than you do in that dress.'"* He husband said, *"Well then, why*

didn't you say, 'Get thee behind me, Satan?'" The wife replied, "I did, but then Devil said, 'Wow, Marilyn, it looks great from back here too!'"

Now, there's nothing wrong with buying a new dress---or a new car---or an I-phone 75---but we must take care, because those things might lead us on a detour from God's path.

- We might have to compromise our integrity to get some of those things.
- We might have to work too many hours to hang on to some of those things.
- We might have to give less to God and to others so that we can have more to spend on ourselves.

Even if we can't have those things, the mere desire for them can sometimes rob us of joy. It can stir up jealousy and greed in our hearts. Do you know what I'm talking about? Have you ever been tempted to have something you weren't supposed to have?

Here's a second thing Wilkerson points out.

**(2) Satan also tempts us to DO THINGS we're not meant to DO.**

Look back at verses 5-7.

***"Then the devil took Him to the holy city and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If You are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw Yourself down. 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." Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'"***

Did you note Satan's tactic here?

It's a redo of the one he used on Eve---he twisted God's Word. Remember? Satan said to Eve, ***"Did God REALLY say you must not eat of any of the fruit of the trees in the garden?"*** Of course, God had NOT said that---He only forbid them to eat of ONE tree---the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan was twisting God's words to make Eve question Him.

Well, Satan was correct here in the wilderness with Jesus---God does say in His book that He will protect His children---but He doesn't say He will protect them from every single thing this fallen world throws at us. As you and I well know, Christians suffer---but we don't suffer alone.

Nor do we suffer without a sure and steadfast hope. The point here is that Satan will tempt us to do something we're not meant to do---to go off on our own, to live carelessly or recklessly, presuming that God will catch us when we fall. As I inferred, that's a dangerous assumption to make.

- If you play in the middle of I-270 at rush hour it won't end well.
- If you jump off the bay bridge you're going to get wet---hurt---probably die.

We weren't meant to do things like this.

- We weren't meant to abuse our minds and bodies with drugs and alcohol and weed.
- People were not meant to give themselves away sexually outside the safety of marriage between one man and one woman.
- We weren't meant to let our anger explode.

When we do these things, it always ends badly. We hurt ourselves and we hurt others.

Have you ever been tempted like this---to do something you weren't meant to do? Here's one more tactic of our adversary that Wilkerson mentions.

**(3) Satan will tempt us to BE SOMEONE we're not meant to BE.**

Look back at verses 8-10: ***"Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give You,' he said, 'if You will bow down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away from Me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only."'"***

Satan invited Jesus to become an EARTHLY king, to have all the cities and nations of the world bow down to Him. But of course, that was not the kind of king that Jesus came to be. God didn't send His Son to set up an earthly kingdom; He sent Him to establish a heavenly kingdom.

Satan will pounce on us in the same way. He will tempt us to be something we're not meant to be—to be popular, to be famous, to be powerful, to be married—to be successful, to be comfortable. Of course, God's Grand story may include some of those things along the way, but Satan comes along and tells us to be them now, before God's perfect timing. And so we run ahead of God or we work around God or we walk away from God. Anyone ever been tempted like this—to BE something you know God doesn't want you to be?

That 40<sup>th</sup> day in the wilderness Jesus was tempted in these three ways—to have something, to be somebody, and to do something other than God intended. In these ways Jesus was being tempted to break away from God's Grand story. Satan offered Jesus a different storyline—one without hardship, without suffering, without the Cross.

- That's the same thing he offered Adam and Eve—a different storyline.
- It's the same thing he offered Israel in the wilderness—a different storyline.
- It's the same thing he offers you and me every time he suggests we be, do, or have something contrary to God's loving will.

Adam and Eve fell victim to that temptation, and the people of Israel fell victim to that temptation time and again. You and I fall victim to these temptations all the time. But Jesus didn't fall. Jesus stood the test. He looked Satan in the eye and said: *"My life is about more than food. It's about more than power. It's about more than safety. It's about doing My Father's will and fulfilling His purpose."* Jesus defeated the lion that prowls around seeking to devour us. Three times Satan came at Him with his worst stuff, and three times Jesus fended him off.

How did he do that?

Well, if we think Jesus did it simply because He was Jesus, we are mistaken. I mean sometimes we think of Jesus—like we do Clark Kent. We think of our Lord as some kind of a superhero disguised as a mild-mannered rabbi wearing His superhero costume beneath His rabbi robes—hiding His superhero face with the first century version of glasses.

That's not what the Bible tells us. Hebrews says, ***"Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity. For this reason, He had to be made like them, fully human in every way. Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted"*** (2:14, 16, 18).

All Jesus was wearing under those robes was skin and bones like you and me.

Now we can get into a long and lively debate about whether Jesus could have or couldn't have given in to this temptation. We're not going to do that—because that's not the point. The point is Jesus wouldn't have sinned, not because He had some special power that you and I don't have—but because He had so strengthened Himself spiritually that in the moment, He was able to say no to temptation.

And that same spiritual strength is available to every Christ follower, to you and me, if we're willing to live the way Jesus lived. We find strength to defeat the devil and live out our part in God's Grand story when we order our lives around the practices of Jesus.

Luke's account shows us this. In Luke 4:1 it says, ***"Jesus, FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT was led by the Spirit into the desert."*** So, our Lord was already full of the Spirit before He even got into the desert. And what did Jesus do while He was there? He fasted. He abstained from food so He could focus on His heavenly Father.

What was Jesus thinking about while He was in the desert? The Scriptures. As Terry alluded Jesus didn't carry a bunch of scrolls. No—He had these Scriptures at His disposal because He had memorized them. He understood their meaning

because He had been reflecting on these words He had inspired Moses to write long ago. In fact, if you take a careful look at the Scriptures He quotes, you notice that all three come from a small section in Deuteronomy---that deals with Israel's time in the wilderness. So---while Jesus was out in that desert blast furnace He was reflecting on Israel's journey in a similar wilderness.

Who did Jesus talk to when he was in the desert? His Heavenly Father. Why did He go to the desert in the first place? To retreat, to find some silence and solitude, to pull away from the noise and the crowds telling Him who He should be and what He should do. He went there so He could train himself to hear His Father telling Him Who He should be and what He should do and what He should have and when.

All this underscores the absolute importance of our training ourselves as Jesus did. We refer to this training---as spiritual disciplines and we typically put them into two categories.

The first is abstinence---fasting. Like Jesus did in the desert, we refrain from good things; food, speaking; Instagram or Facebook---watching our favorite live-stream shows. Sometimes we fast from human company. I study for my sermon alone at home the first three days of every week because I need to be alone with God. Solitude---fasting from others in order to better FASTEN on to God is a good thing. In any case this is what Lent is all about. It's a time for us to refrain from various things for a season in order to make space for God in our lives.

But there are also the disciplines of prayer, Scripture reading, and worship---private and corporate. Jesus had been doing these things since He was a boy. This is what Hebrews 13:8 means when it says our Lord **"learned"** obedience to God. Because of these disciplines---this learning---our Lord Who was fully human, was so grounded, He was so connected, that in the moment of temptation He was able to stand strong. That same spiritual strength is available to you and me.

In his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard said that the way to live the Christian life is to stop TRYING to be like Jesus. He writes: *"If you want to keep all of Jesus' commands, don't TRY to keep His commands. Become the kind of person who would easily and ROUTINELY keep all of Jesus' commands. Don't TRY to be like Jesus. TRAIN to be like Jesus."*

Several years ago, when Daniel was still in the area and Becca was living with us after grad school, they both challenged me to enter a six-mile race in Olney. I told them, *"I don't think I can do that because the most I have been running lately is four miles."* They both said, *"No problem. If you can run four miles---you can run six."* So, I agreed. Sadly, when race day came, neither one of them was able to compete---so I was all by myself each of those six hill-filled Olney miles---but I learned that my kids were right. I had trained myself to run four miles and that training made it possible for me to run six. I ended up with a pretty good time too!

That's an illustration of how you overcome temptation---not by trying, but by training. If I had not been regularly running four miles---I could not have run six. In the same way through these spiritual disciplines---like JOINING A GRACE GROUP---we can be enabled---TRAINED---to do the things that God's put on our hearts to do---things we could NEVER do by just TRYING.

I like what Terry said about our worshiping in rows---but GROWING spiritually in circles like a grace group! Studying God's Word with others circled up in a small group is an essential part of our TRAINING to be like Jesus. The fact is we can't overcome temptation by gritting our teeth and willing ourselves to overcome. We can only do it by becoming the kind of people who normally and routinely do what God wants. And spiritual disciplines train you to embrace that routine.

If you can learn to connect with God every morning, you will probably be able to connect with Him throughout the day---even when your boss is on your back or your kids are testing your patience. If you can learn to be silent for an hour or for an entire day, listening to God's still, small voice, then you will learn to hold your tongue when you feel like lashing out at somebody.

The point of this part of God's grand story is that Jesus had ordered His life around these disciplines. So---when Satan

showed up, Jesus was ready. He was able to stand strong, even when He was hungry and exhausted and alone. Jesus won this showdown in the wilderness. He delivered a roundhouse punch to His enemy that sent him staggering off, licking his wounds.

Luke tells us that when the Devil had finished tempting Jesus, ***“He left Him till a more opportune time.”*** Jesus would meet this enemy again, many times during His ministry, right up until the end. Remember? Jesus sweated great drops of blood as He wrestled in the Garden of Gethsemane, resisting temptation to find another way to save us---a shortcut around suffering---when there was none.

And I have to point out that God’s plan for Jesus was way better than the story Satan offered. Satan suggested that Jesus make himself a few loaves of bread. But by following God’s timing, Jesus made enough bread to feed thousands of people. Ultimately, Jesus is the Bread of Life that feeds the world.

Satan offered Jesus the opportunity to rule the kingdoms of the world of that time. But the Bible says a time will come when EVERYONE will bow to Him as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Satan dared Jesus to throw himself from the Temple to see if God would catch him at the last moment. Jesus was taken into a tomb. God raised Him from the dead and He now sits exalted in Heaven. God’s story for Jesus was far better than the story Satan offered. And God’s story for our lives is far better than what the enemy offers. It’s not necessarily an easier story, but it’s a better story. And we can live it. We can find the strength when we order our lives around the practices of Jesus.

LET US PRAY