

## **BOULDERS TO BREAD**

**Luke 4:1-13**

**Dr. Howard Batson  
First Baptist Church  
Amarillo, Texas  
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A young couple was struggling with their finances. In an effort to get a better handle on their spending, they agreed that whenever they were tempted to make an impulsive purchase they would say, “Get behind me Satan.” One evening the wife came home with a very elegant dress that was obviously not a budgeted item. She proudly modeled it for her husband and asked him what he thought. He noted its beauty, but wondered why his wife had not adhered to their little agreement. He remarked, “I thought we agreed that whenever we are tempted to make an impulsive purchase we would say, ‘Get behind me Satan.’ Did you forget to do that?” The wife replied, “Oh no, I did just like we agreed.” The husband then asked, “Well, what happened this time?” She confessed, “He said it looks good from back here, too!”

*Everything is at stake here. Will Jesus, the one whom God has sent to proclaim good news to the poor, defect? Will he choose power, serve Satan? He could. This is no pre-scripted chancel drama; the fate of humanity hangs on the choice of this hungry, tempted man. We watch transfixed, wanting to shout, “No, don’t do it!” but silenced by the sickening knowledge that, were we in his place, we would sign the deal [with the devil]. (Richard B. Hays)*

Pretend for a moment that you have never read or heard the story about Jesus’ trial of temptation. Having already read chapters 1-3 of Luke’s “orderly account,” you know that Jesus is “the Son of God” (1:35; 3:22), born of a virgin (1:34). Ironically, you have also discovered that he was “born in a barn” (2:7) and, thus, had to borrow the cattle’s feeding trough for a cradle. The paradox of Jesus being both God and man comes forth fully in Luke’s tale of temptation. How could Jesus fail? He is God’s salvation (2:30), the beloved Son who pleases his Father (3:22). On the other hand, how could he stand strong? He is a starving man needing nourishing bread, a flesh-and-blood man seeking to avoid the cruelty of the cross (Luke 22:42).

We dare not rush by the temptation drama lest we make light of this saga of Satan’s enticements. Everything is on the line, as our Lord is tempted to use his powers for his own personal purposes. He is tempted, moreover, to trade in God’s plan of salvation, which comes along the rough road of suffering, for Satan’s pseudo-glory which promises to avoid the cross. As we turn to the temptation account, sit on the edge of your seat, pondering and praying that Jesus will make it through the horrible event unscathed. And never forget that if the Savior sins, we have no salvation.

### **Multiple Meanings**

The story of Christ’s temptation may be viewed through various interpretive lenses. Each approach bears a measure of truth, as Luke leads his reader down multiple paths of understanding. We will

review the various readings of the passage here and more fully unpack them as we approach the verses below. In the temptation event:

1. Jesus is presented as the true Israel who is faithful to his Father in the wilderness, when Israel of old failed.
2. Jesus is presented as the new Adam who faces the trial of the tempter as did Adam and Eve, yet without succumbing to Satan's snare.
3. Jesus is presented as a suffering servant of Isaiah (Isaiah 53) who accomplishes the victory of our redemption by going through suffering and death, rather than avoiding it.

### **By the Spirit (Luke 4:1)**

The opening verse of the narrative reminds us of Jesus' unique relation to the Holy Spirit. We have clearly learned that Jesus was conceived through the creative power of the Holy Spirit (1:35), and we witnessed the Spirit as it descended like a dove upon Jesus at his baptism (3:21-22). We are, therefore, not surprised to find him both "full of the Spirit" and "led about by the Spirit." As this chapter progresses, Jesus will be empowered by the Spirit (4:14) and anointed by the Spirit (4:18). Before Satan seeks to sidetrack our Savior, Luke lets his readers know that the ministry of the Messiah is guided by God's Spirit rather than the tempting powers of darkness.

### **By the Devil (Luke 4:2a)**

No doubt, the language of being led in the wilderness reminds us of God's leading ancient Israel there: "And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years..." (Deuteronomy 8:2), and "He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with His fiery serpents and scorpions..." (Deuteronomy 8:15). Jesus is not being led to an idyllic retreat. Rather, this wilderness, like Israel's, is the waterless place of snakes and scorpions (Deuteronomy 8:15).

Let's note the similarities between Jesus' wilderness experience and that of ancient Israel.

1. Both were divinely led into the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:2, 15; Luke 4:1).
2. Both endured a period of forty—forty years for Israel, forty days for Jesus (Exodus 16:35; Numbers 14:34; Deuteronomy 8:2, 4; Luke 4:2).
3. Both are referred to as "the Son of God" (Exodus 4:22-23; Luke 4:3, 9).
4. Both were tested along similar story lines during their wilderness wanderings.
  - a. Israel was allowed to hunger in order to learn that one does not live by bread alone (Deuteronomy 8:3; cf. Luke 4:2-4).
  - b. Israel was instructed to worship the one and only God and not follow other gods (Deuteronomy 6:4-15; cf. Luke 4:6-8).
  - c. Israel was told not to put the Lord God to the test (Exodus 17:1-3; Deuteronomy 6:16; cf. Luke 4:12).

Luke surely wants his reader to realize that while Israel utterly failed to be an obedient “son of God” (Exodus 17:1-7; Deuteronomy 9:6-29; cf. Acts 7:35, 39-43), Jesus—the true Son of God—relives Israel’s history of temptation in the wilderness and, yet, proves to be completely obedient. Most appropriately, Jesus’ response to Satan’s temptation comes from texts directly connected to the testing of Israel in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 6:13, 16; 8:3).

Luke identifies the tempter as “the devil” (*diabolos*) from which we get our word “diabolical.” Despite modern attempts to dismiss the devil as just an “idea” and not a real “person,” the Bible clearly presents the evil one as both actual and powerful. He tries to ruin the relationship between God and humanity, between Creator and creation (Genesis 3:1-7) and is best summed up as an enemy who comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). While we must acknowledge both his existence and wily schemes, we should not give undue study to the demonic. To do so is to be drawn into the very web you wish to avoid. Karl Barth, a premier theologian of the twentieth century agreed: “Ask me no question about the demon, for I am not an authority on the subject! However, it is necessary for us to know that the devil exists, but then we must hasten away from him.”

### **Turning Boulders to Bread (Luke 4:2b-3)**

Interestingly, Luke does not use the usual verb for “fasting.” He simply tells us that Jesus “ate nothing” for forty days. We are reminded of Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 9:9 when Moses “ate no bread and drank no water.” Most likely, this was a season in Moses’ life when Moses communed with God as he prepared to receive the law. In similar fashion, Jesus abstains from physical food to fully nourish himself spiritually for the kingdom mission, including the cross, which lies ahead on his journey to Jerusalem.

The real temptation encapsulated within the invitation to turn boulders to bread is an enticement for Jesus to selfishly attend to his own affairs and cease to see servanthood as part of his Sonship. At the core of the gospel is the expectation that the Son will suffer for the redemption of humanity. Of course, as the Son of God, Jesus could easily feed himself, as he will later miraculously feed five thousand (9:12)!

### **Relying on More than Bread Alone (Luke 4:4)**

Jesus responds, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone’” (Deuteronomy 8:3a). Put plainly, Jesus’ desire to follow God’s path even takes precedence over the strongest desires to feed the flesh with food. Jesus has not just “missed a few meals.” He is starving, on the brink of death from lack of nourishment. Michael Peel, in the *British Medical Journal*, cites well-documented studies reporting survivals of hunger strikers for 28, 36, 38, and, yes, 40 days. Jesus’ physical weakness is hard to overestimate. He chooses to starve, in obedience, when he could have easily turned the boulders to bread.

### **Accessing Glory (Luke 4:5-8)**

What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Henri Nouwen reflects, “Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. Jesus asks, ‘Do you love me?’ We ask, ‘Can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your Kingdom?’ (Matthew 20:21)... We have been tempted to replace love with power.”

Notice that Luke orders the temptations thusly: bread, worldly kingdoms, and the temple leap, while Matthew differs in the order of the last two: temple leap then worldly kingdoms (Matthew 4). This passage reminds us of Moses standing at the top of Pisgah, as the Lord shows him the whole Promised Land (Deuteronomy 34:1-4). The devil's deal includes giving Jesus nothing less than all the kingdoms of the world. The price? Jesus must switch camps from total allegiance to God to total allegiance to Satan by an act of worship.

The real temptation, once again, is to avoid God's planned journey for Jesus' glory—suffering and service. The angel Gabriel has already made clear that Jesus would rule and there would be no end to his kingdom (1:31-33). And Psalm 2:8 says of the Lord's Messiah, "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession." The devil, however, offers a "shabby substitute" to replace an "everlasting kingdom." While the devil pretends to have total possession of the world, he can only offer to Jesus what God has given to him (Revelation 13:7-8).

Jesus' response, Deuteronomy 6:13-15, recalls God's expectation that Israel is to worship God alone. Unlike Israel (God's son), Jesus (God's obedient Son) refuses to worship anyone other than God alone.

### **Testing God's Promises (Luke 4:9-12)**

Finally, the last temptation occurs on "the Pinnacle" (literally "wingtip") of the temple. Most likely, this is in reference to the pinnacle of a tower at the top of the royal colonnade that overlooked the deep ravine on the south side. The Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us the height of the tower was dizzying. At the heart of the last temptation is God's plan for Jesus to face death by crucifixion in Jerusalem (Luke 9:51; 13:32-33).

If Jesus wants to "play the scripture card," Satan now joins in the game. The devil reminds Jesus that the temple is a fortress, a place of God's protection, as he alludes to Psalm 91:1-2 and directly quotes Psalm 91:11-12. When Jesus does "leap" toward death by entering Jerusalem during the festival—despite the fact that the Jewish authorities are seeking to kill him—the angels do not protect him from death's fall (the cross). They, on the contrary, strengthen him for the struggle (Luke 22:43). Following the devil's logic, there would be no martyrs. But God preserves through death (Luke 21:16-19; 22:39-46), rather than from death.

### **Waiting Until the Opportune Time (Luke 4:13)**

Jesus' victory over temptation reminds us of Adam's failure to be obedient. Luke, therefore, is presenting Jesus as a "New Adam" who fulfills, where the first Adam fails. Unlike the other Gospel writers, Luke traces Jesus' genealogy back to Adam, who is also called "the son of God" (Luke 3:38). How do the two Adams compare—Adam of the Old Testament and the "New Adam," Jesus?

1. Jesus obeys God; Adam yields to the tempter (Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-6).
2. Adam is given dominion over the world (Genesis 1:26-28), but seeks more power to be like God. Jesus, on the other hand, seeks no kingdom for himself.

3. Adam disobeys God and hopes that he will not die (Genesis 3:4). Jesus, on the other hand, accepts his mission of the cross.
4. Adam loses paradise (Genesis 3:24); Jesus, on the other hand, tells the repentant sinner that he will share paradise with him (Luke 23:43).

Satan is gone, but will surely return. When the devil re-enters Luke's narrative, Judas joins the high priest in the maneuver against the Messiah. Judas, as well, looks for a "good occasion" to hand over his rabbi. Luke 22:3-6 reads: "And Satan entered into Judas...and he went away and discussed with the chief priests and officers how he might betray Him to them...and he consented, and began seeking a good opportunity to betray Him to them...."

### **Conclusion**

Without a sinless Savior, we would have no salvation. We can now relax, however, now knowing that Jesus, unlike Adam or Israel, was obedient to God's every command. Luke tells us about Jesus' faithfulness when he was led into the wilderness of testing, but how will you and I respond to Satan's snare? Jesus understood his role in God's plan; do we? Frederick J. Streets, once the chaplain at Yale University, observed, "We are also tempted to give our loyalty to people or situations that promise to give us power in return. Whatever god we worship is the god who will hold us accountable....Our integrity flows from the clarity we have about our commitments and how we understand, use, and value power."

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As we see portrayed by world powers today, raw grabs for power display the very worst in fallen creation. Sin is evil. Satan is diabolical, and he tempts men to seize and snatch power over any weaker opponent – just because power is a drug that has no limits, no satisfaction. All good people and all who see through the puppets to the evil powers behind them must stand strong. Let's be of good faith. (Spoken the week Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine)