

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 10, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
(1) THE TEMPTATION**

Matthew 4:1-11

TRAVELS WITH CHARLEY

In 1960, writer John Steinbeck took a road trip around the US in a camper along with his dog, a poodle named Charley. Steinbeck wrote about their journey in his book, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (published in 1962). Some of you have probably read it. Steinbeck said he wanted to see America on a personal level in order to find out what Americans were really like. Starting out from Long Island, NY, Steinbeck and Charley went north to Maine, then crossed the US pretty much following the northern border to the Pacific northwest, then down into the Salinas Valley in California, where Steinbeck was from, across the southwest to Texas, through the deep south, and then back to New York. Altogether, the trip encompassed nearly 10,000 miles.

TRAVELS WITH JESUS

It sounds like an extremely interesting trip, and I would love to do something like that, if time and money were no object. But I want to invite you to join me on a different road trip. Instead of traveling with Steinbeck and Charley, I want to invite you to go on a road trip with Jesus, to follow Jesus and learn from Him as He traveled through the countryside, villages, and towns of Galilee, Judea, and Samaria during the years of His sojourn on earth. Though, as an adult, He never traveled more than 100 miles from His hometown of Nazareth, He packed an extraordinary amount of life, ministry, and teaching into a short life. So I invite you, starting today, to join me as we travel with Jesus.

The travels of Jesus began when He willingly set aside the glories of heaven and, in the words of Joe Bayly, “Stepped across the stars to Bethlehem and Jerusalem” (Bayly, “A Poem for Christmas Eve”). The earthly travels of Jesus took Him from Bethlehem, the place of His birth, to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod (Matthew 2:13-18), and then to Nazareth, where He grew up (2:19-23). During His growing up years, He traveled with His parents to Jerusalem every year for the Passover, including the time when He was 12, when His parents started on their way back home to Nazareth, only to discover that Jesus was not with them. So they went back to Jerusalem and found Jesus in the temple courts talking theology with the teachers of the law (Luke 2:41-52).

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

When it was time for His ministry to begin, Jesus went to be baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, as a way of identifying with the sinners He came to save (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22).

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT: THE TEMPTATION

Then, here is what happened next: Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit out into the wild, into the desert wilderness of Judea, to be tempted by the devil. We read the account of Jesus' temptation in Matthew 4:1-11. There is a very similar account of it in Luke 4:1-13. The Gospel of Mark has a much more condensed, compressed account of it, only 2 verses (Mark 1:12-13). Here is how Mark's account sounds in *The Message* paraphrase: "At once" – immediately following the baptism of Jesus – "(the) Spirit pushed Jesus out into the wild. For 40 wilderness days and nights He was tested by Satan. Wild animals were His companions, and angels took care of Him." That is all Mark says about it. He does not talk about the specific temptations Jesus experienced, but He leaves no doubt that the testing in the wilderness was real.

Have you ever wondered how we know about these temptations Jesus endured? After all, there were no eyewitnesses. Nobody else was there to see it or to hear the exchange between the devil and Jesus. Apart from direct, supernatural revelation from God, the only way Matthew or any of the Gospel writers or any of Jesus' followers could have known about it is that Jesus must have told them. At some point during the three years He was with them, Jesus must have told His disciples (not just the 12, but others, too, probably including His mother Mary and other women who were part of His band of followers) about His showdown with the devil in the desert, about His encounters with Satan and how He dealt with these very real temptations.

Some people, when they hear that Jesus lived a sinless life and never gave in to the temptation to sin, are tempted to think either a) it can't be true; or b) Jesus never experienced the power of temptation like we do, that unlike us Jesus doesn't know what the full force of temptation is like.

Do you know how crazy that is? The truth is that Jesus knows way more about temptation and its power than any of us ever will. Why? Because He endured the full force of the tempter's arsenal. Satan unloaded everything he had on Jesus. But Jesus never gave in. We, on the other hand, know much, much less about the power of temptation because so often we give in to it without putting up much of a fight. Not always, of course. But way too often.

Jack Handey is a comedian and writer who was featured years ago on *Saturday Night Live* in a segment called "Deep Thoughts." I never watch *SNL*, in case you're wondering. It's on much too late for any respectable man of God. (So are Saturday night NFL playoff games.) ☺ Anyway, Handey wrote a book called *Fuzzy Memories* in which he tells about a bully who demanded Handey's lunch money every day when he was a boy. Since Handey was smaller than the bully, he simply gave the bully his money.

"Then I decided to fight back," Handey says. "I started taking karate lessons, but the instructor wanted \$5 a lesson. That was a lot of money [back then]. I found that it was cheaper to pay the bully, so I gave up karate." That, says Greg Laurie, is unfortunately the attitude many Christians have about Satan (who is a bully if there ever was one) and the temptations

with which he tempts us. We decide it is easier to pay the bully – to just give in to temptation – than to learn how to fight him (Greg Laurie, *Lies We Tell Ourselves*, 99-100).

Is that true in your life? Have you just given up trying to resist temptation in some area of your life? Isn't it true that sometimes (if not often) we just give up and give in to temptation because it is easier than resisting the devil and saying "No" to him?

Jesus knows way more about temptation and its power than we ever will. People who continue to resist it without giving in are the ones who feel the weight of it most fully. And nobody has ever resisted temptation the way Jesus has. The Bible tells us that "Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18) – which means, *us*. The Bible also tells us that Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus knows all about temptation. But He never, ever gave in to it. Even when suffering was the result.

The temptations to which we are most vulnerable may not be the ones Jesus experienced in the wilderness. For example, I have never been tempted to turn stones into bread. How about you? As one writer (Leon Morris) says: "Turning stones into bread is not a temptation for us; it is a temptation only to someone who knows he can do it" (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 70). Well, *Jesus* could do it. *We* can't. So it is not a temptation for you or me. But it was for Him. Especially given the fact that He had abstained from food for 40 days and "was hungry," as Matthew says in one of the great understatement of all time (4:2)!

Since Jesus could do it, what would be wrong, we might ask, with turning stones into bread, given how hungry He must have been and the fact that there was no food available out in the desert? Why would that be wrong?

What made it wrong was that Satan – "the Adversary"; the archenemy of God, of God's people, and of Jesus as the true Son of God and Savior of sinners – wanted Jesus to use His power as the Son of God to satisfy His own personal needs, rather than trusting the Father to provide for His needs. "If you are the Son of God" – which really means "Since you are the Son of God," since the devil did not doubt or deny Jesus' identity as God the Son – "go ahead and turn these stones into loaves of bread. Surely you have not only the power but the right to do it."

But notice how Jesus responds. He responds by appealing to God's Word. He goes directly to the inspired, revealed Word of God. He goes to the Bible for guidance and direction.

I want you to see – I believe God wants you to see – that the same resources and strategies that were available to Jesus during this ordeal of temptation are available to you and me today. What are those resources?

1. Prayer

The first is prayer: There is never a time when it is not time to pray. This is supremely true when you are facing temptation of any kind. It is always the right time to ask the Lord for

help, for protection, for grace and strength to resist the devil and withstand the tactics of the tempter, and to pray for a way of escape, just as God promised in 1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” *The Message* says: “No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; He’ll never let you be pushed past your limit; He’ll always be there to help you come through it.”

Whenever you face temptation, whatever the temptation may be, you can pray for God’s help to enable you to say “No” and to stand firm in faith and obedience.

2. The Father’s Love

The second resource to rely on in the face of temptation is the assurance of God’s love for you. At the baptism of Jesus, right before the time of temptation out in the wild, the Father declared His love for Jesus. He said: “This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased” (Mathew 3:17). In His amazing grace, our Heavenly Father says the same thing to each of us: “You are my son/my daughter, whom I love and with whom I am well pleased.” We are not God’s children in the same way that Jesus is the Son of God. We are not God’s children on the basis of having earned His favor by our performance. We are God’s sons and daughters by adoption. We are God’s beloved sons and daughters by God’s sovereign and gracious choice. And the Bible promises that nothing – including the most awful temptation you can ever imagine, or the worst sin you can ever commit – will ever separate you, as a sinner saved by grace, from the love of God expressed in the person and work of Jesus Christ His Son (Romans 8:38-39).

Even when you fail, when you give in to any temptation that gets the better of you, remember that you are loved and valued by God. And His grace is greater than all your sins.

3. The presence of the Holy Spirit

The third resource you can rely on when you are tempted is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in your life. You are not alone. God the Holy Spirit – the third Person of the Trinity – is not only *with* you but lives *in* you. If you allow Him, if you give Him room in your life, if you will graciously submit to His leadership in both the big things and the little things of life, He will give you the grace, wisdom, and courage to say “No” to Satan whenever the enemy attacks.

4. The Word of God

The fourth resource, the one that takes center stage in Jesus’ testing in the wilderness, is the Word of God. Every time Satan comes to Jesus with a proposal, how does Jesus respond? He says: “It is written.” He appeals to the authority of God’s Word. Long before the *Westminster Confession of Faith* was written, or the *EPC Essentials of Our Faith*, Jesus knew that the

Bible is the final and only infallible rule for faith and life. If we understand it correctly and apply it properly, the Bible will never lead us astray.

The psalmist's affirmation in Psalm 119: 9, 11 is helpful here. Verse 9 says: "How can a young man keep his way pure?" The question applies equally to a young woman, to girls and boys, to men and women of every age and generation: How can we stay on the right path and live godly lives?

The answer: "By living according to (God's) word." Or, as *The Message* says: "By carefully reading the map of (God's) Word" and living by it.

Then, in verse 11, the psalmist says: "I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Knowing God's Word is indispensable if you desire to live a godly life. You have to have a regular, healthy diet of God's Word.

In each of the temptations with which the tempter tempted Jesus and attempted to lead Him astray, Jesus turned to the Word of God. He resisted each of the temptations in the desert by invoking the Word of God.

Jesus shows us that the Bible is both a sword and a shield. In Ephesians 6:17, Paul refers to the Word of God as the "Sword of the Spirit." It is part of the armor of God, one of the weapons with which we are to arm ourselves for the spiritual warfare that is inescapable in this world. But God's Word can also serve as a shield. In the preceding verse, Ephesians 6:16, Paul urges us to "Take up the shield of faith, with which (we) can extinguish all the fiery darts and arrows of the evil one." God's Word acts as a shield as well as a sword. We can use God's Word to ward off the attacks of our enemy, the devil. Faith in the truthfulness and trustworthiness of God's Word is a shield to keep us from being wounded (or worse) by the lies, tricks, and temptations of the devil.

Here is where the rubber meets the road for us: The same strategies and resources that worked for Jesus *can* work for you and me. In the name and power of Jesus, you *can* resist the devil, as it says in James 4:7, and the devil will flee from you. In the name and power of Jesus, you *can* defeat the devil. Giving in to temptation is *not* inevitable when you belong to Jesus, when you know you are loved and valued by God, when the Holy Spirit lives in you and is in the process of making you holy, when you have all the resources of prayer and God's Word at your disposal, when you surrender in faith and love to the sovereign and gracious rule of the Lord Jesus in your life.

The thing is (and it is a *big* thing): These resources will never be of any help to you when you are tempted unless you use them. You've got to work them into your life.

We have just begun our travels with Jesus. There is more to explore in the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. So we will return to it next week.

I don't know exactly what temptations you are experiencing or to which you are most susceptible. In some cases I can probably guess, because I'm familiar with some of the most common temptations people face today. Maybe I'll talk about some of them next Sunday.

God knows where and when and how you are most tempted. He knows where you are weakest and most vulnerable. He knows when you give in and when you stand firm. He knows all about your struggles, your failures, and your successes. He is grieved by your sin (and mine), but it does not change the fact of His love for you. And it never will.

Do not ever think that your failure in the face of temptation disqualifies you from the love of God, or from the gift of salvation, or from being a child of God. His grace is greater than all your sin. So, rest in the assurance of His love.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.