

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“GRACE THAT SUSTAINS US”

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 4: 1-11

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, February 22, 2026
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Matthew 4: 1-11

The Testing of Jesus

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” 4 But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’
and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is 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 glory, 9 and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10 Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Grace That Sustains Us

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Our New Testament lesson this morning wastes no time. Jesus “was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Right away we notice that this spiritual battle was not random; it was not accidental. Jesus being out there in the wilderness was not outside the will of God. No, He was led.

But lest we either distress or forget, the Bible makes it abundantly clear that God tempts no one to sin. Temptation comes only from the evil one, but God can test His people, and it is oftentimes in that testing that the contents of our hearts are revealed, that very treasure that we possess in these clay jars of ours.

Another thing we need to keep in mind is that prior to this moment, and at His baptism, God had declared, “This is my beloved Son.” That sequence is important, because only after that declaration does the

wilderness come, which is to say that Jesus did not earn His Sonship through obedience; he obeys because he is the Son.

That pattern holds true for us. God's claim upon our lives precedes our performance; identity comes before obedience. In other words, God's love is not the reward for our obedience; it is the foundation of it.

When we look closely at Matthew 4, we realize that Matthew's focus is not on giving us a strategy for resisting temptation. He is not telling us to do this, this, this, and this and things will be ok. What Matthew is showing us is where Jesus succeeded where others had failed.

In Genesis, for example, Adam faced the Devil in a garden, and it should be noted that in that Garden of Eden, Adam enjoyed abundance and companionship, and everything was going his way, and he still failed. In Deuteronomy 8, we are told that the Lord led Israel for forty years in the wilderness in order to humble them, and he fed them with manna to teach them and us that "[we] do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." But when the people of God got to their own wilderness, all they did was grumble and complain; they all but forgot about God's faithfulness.

Ah, there are a myriad of ways that Jesus was different from both Adam and Israel. Adam faced his temptation surrounded by provision and sustenance, but Jesus has been fasting; he is hungry and he is weak. And while Israel's wanderings had been marked by grumbling and a profound lack of trust in God, we see none of that in Jesus, only complete trust and obedience.

What is more, it should be added that none of these connections or dissimilarities are coincidental, because what we are witnessing in the person and work of Jesus is the full breadth and scope of God's redemptive history unfolding before our very eyes! This is what the Apostle Paul wrote about in Romans 5, "through one man's disobedience many were made sinners; through one man's obedience many will be made righteous."

You see, only perfect obedience can satisfy the justice of God, and because it is not within our capacity to offer it, Jesus offers it for us. Or to put it another way, what Adam broke, only Jesus can repair.

As Jesus has been fasting for 40 days, the Devil takes this as an opportune time to tempt him. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." We notice that the attack, it was not merely about hunger. It was about identity. "If you are the Son..."

But let us remember, Jesus had just been baptized, and we recall that when Jesus came up out of the water a voice from heaven declared, "This is my Son, the beloved." Because Jesus' Sonship was not in question, we realize that this temptation in essence was for Jesus to prove it. Go ahead, use your power for yourself. Satisfy your need. Act independently of God. It should become increasingly clear for us that the issue at hand was not bread; the issue was trust!

Jesus answered with words from Deuteronomy 8: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." To Jesus' credit, he would rather remain hungry than step outside the will of God. And so it happened that where Adam once took and ate, Jesus trusted in God's provision!

The second temptation began like the first in that, again, the Devil says, "If you are the Son of God..." but this time the Devil himself quotes Scripture, Psalm 91. When faced with the question of what would happen if Jesus were to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, the Devil says, "He will command His angels concerning you."

And is that not interesting? The enemy knows the Bible, but he twists it. We see this happening all the time, do we not? A person or a cause will take their ideology, and they will bless it with a Bible verse, putting sacred trappings on a secular vision.

This temptation for Jesus looks like faith, but it is not! Go ahead, jump! Force God to prove his care. Call upon God for visible protection! You know he will do it!

But Jesus knows in his heart that true faith does not misrepresent what God intends, and, in this case, testing God and demanding signs is not the same thing as trusting God. So, Jesus responds with Deuteronomy 6: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." In saying that, Jesus makes it clear that he will not allow true trust in God to be turned into a kind of theater.

The scene shifts to the third temptation! The Devil shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world. "All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me." We notice the progression. The first temptation was about provision; the second temptation had to do with protection; and the third temptation had to do with, well, everything.

This was glory without suffering; a crown without a cross; this was a kingdom without obedience. Think about it, this was the world Jesus loved and came to redeem, offered without Golgotha! This was that cup of pain and suffering that Jesus had been called upon to drink to the dregs; this was that cup passing him by!

I dare say we give into that kind of temptation more than we may care to admit. We tend to like the end without the means, the glory without faithfulness. Authority without submission? Sure! Why not?

Jesus answers again from Deuteronomy 6: "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." With that, the Devil departs, and angels minister to Jesus' needs. Make no mistake about it, Jesus will fully enact the Kingdom of God, but it will proceed from His Father's hand, and in God's good time, and it will be accomplished through the path of obedience, even obedience unto death!

To be certain, this wilderness battle is not the end of Jesus' mission, but it is a decisive victory. As had been foretold, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman has begun to crush the serpent's head.

And in this way, Jesus did not merely model resistance, he fought as our representative, and this, dear friends, is the gospel, because if salvation depended upon our performance in the wilderness, we would be lost. But not Jesus; he stood where Adam fell, and he trusted where Israel failed, and he obeyed in every way where we might be prone to compromise.

And here is the miracle: Jesus' is not just an obedience that is to be admired; it is an obedience that has been credited to us! In other words, Jesus' righteousness is counted as our righteousness! This is to say that by grace, through faith, we are united to Christ and what is his has become ours!

Which means we fight not for victory, but from the position of victory; victory has already been accomplished! This we affirmed when we celebrated Francis' / Ben's baptism this morning, because, in baptism, God's love claims us long before we can respond in faith.

This means that God loves us before we obey; before we struggle; before whatever wilderness we may face. At the Jordan River, God declared over Jesus, "This is my beloved Son." And in our baptisms, God claims us as well.

Now, to be clear, we do not baptize our children because they have conquered temptation; we baptize them because Jesus has conquered temptation. In this way, God's promise always comes before performance; grace precedes effort; and our identity as children of God comes before obedience.

We have all faced times of hunger, and doubt, and temptation, and our children that we baptize will face them as well! But before that day arrives, God has already said it, "You belong to Me," and that is grace that sustains us!

Oh, we may be in a wilderness season right now. We may feel hungry, and tested, and weary! And the temptation may be to look to our own strength, but that is not our calling. No! Our calling is to look to our Savior, to look to the one who has stood where we fall and obeyed where we fail, the one who has conquered where we could not!

And because Jesus has won, temptation is not sovereign, sin does not have the last word; indeed, the evil one has already been defeated. In our Old Testament Lesson Moses reminded Israel that the wilderness was not the destination; it was the pathway to a good land, a land of abundance and promise! And so, it is for us as well!

In Jesus, the wilderness was never the end; the cross would secure the victory, the resurrection would announce it to the world, and Jesus' ascension, his heavenly coronation, has been, in a word, accomplished!

And so, we, united with Jesus, approach the throne of grace with confidence, receiving mercy and finding help in times of need. Oh, we are so blessed to share in Jesus' victory over temptations, and ultimately his victory over the power of sin and death. How blessed we are to have this truth, this very Gospel.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.