

We are used to reading bits and snippets of biblical books, like this story of Jesus' temptations, in isolation from one another. Yet St Luke intended that we hear the Gospel as a whole, and that we keep this incident in its context. If we look at what lies on either side, we realise that Luke has at least three important ideas for us to understand as we think about Jesus' temptation.

First, right from the beginning of this gospel every finger points to Jesus as a wunderkind, as a prodigy, as the "next great thing." He was born miraculously! He was feted by the great prophetic voices of the day! He confounded the scholars when he was only twelve, and his public coming out was shouted loudly by none other than the greatest religious figure of the day, John the Baptist. Jesus was the next new thing, and all the lights were pointing in his direction. When Jesus was tempted, we are keyed up to expect him to pull out his sword or light sabre and slash his way to victory. But he did not. In fact, Jesus' way of dealing with these great evil threats seems almost benign. Quote a few scripture verses? Turn his back on the devil? Saunter away as if nothing happened? Hmmmmm...

Second, St Luke and the other gospel writers gave us big hints that Jesus was walking in the footsteps of Old Testament Israel. Jesus was tempted "in the wilderness," spending "forty days" there, just as Israel did between leaving Egypt and entering the promised land. Not only that, but the temptations themselves paralleled Israel's most challenging wilderness experiences: "We're starving, Moses! Make a miracle and give us food!" "We won against Pharaoh's army! We can be the most powerful nation in the world!" "God loves us! God will do anything for us!"

After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus was starving, Jesus was feeling the power of his connection with God, and Jesus was weakened enough to consider throwing himself on the "magic" of God's snap-of-the-finger, make-it-all-right providence. Like Israel in the wilderness, Jesus had been bounced around, experienced highs and lows, and was possibly ready to listen to any whisper of temptation that came along.

The third thing St Luke wanted us to know was that this story was a foreshadowing of an ominous future. Notice again the premonition of more bad things to come that St Luke used to close the episode: "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). Round one went to Jesus, said St Luke, but round two and who knows how many more were still to come. The temptations would morph. They would snipe in at a different angle. The fight was not yet finished.

All three of these things — desperation, access to power, and success — were the key ideas St Luke wanted us to focus on as we tracked with Jesus through this challenge. They were also the things Jesus wanted us to think about in ourselves, as he walked our walk with us.

Desperation

It happens too often, doesn't it? Years ago, I watched a young couple bury a newborn son despite the best efforts of medical science. In my career as a priest, I have seen robust faith degenerate through years of setbacks and loss.

Because of the fickleness of our experiences and the frailty of our existence, our travels are rarely even keel. We rise to heights of ecstasy. We drop to "sloughs of despond," as Bunyan put it in *The*

Pilgrim's Progress. We ride the roller coaster with its cheers and fears, some of them deeply disturbing. We see Jesus there, in this wilderness spot of temptation, and know that this will not be the last time. It reminds me of the hymns of William Cowper, a member of John Newton's congregation in Olney, England, in the 1700s. Some of his poetry has found its way into the classic hymnals of the church. "God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform," says one hymn. Another declares, less well known is a wonderful confession of confidence: "What God ordains is always right; he guides our joy and sadness. He is our life and blessed light; in him alone is gladness. We see his face, the way of grace; he holds us in his mighty arm and keeps us safe from every harm." But William Cowper was a troubled soul. He began to slip in and out of depression. He spent a year and a half in what was then called an "lunatic asylum." His hymns began to take on a darker colour. During those bleak times, he penned this cry of spiritual loneliness: "Where is the blessedness I knew, when first I sought the Lord? Where is the soul-refreshing view of Jesus and his word?" Cowper died of a broken heart and a crushed spirit. Yet the only way out is through, as Jesus shows us. Scripture is our link to heaven's resources: light in the darkness, stability over shifting footfalls, strength when muscles give out, resilience against temptations.

The Lure Of Success

But sometimes the temptations do not crowd us in or trap us in desperation. Instead, they promise us the world. "Just do this, and you will get what you know you deserve!" "Just sign here, and we will guarantee you a win!" "Buy now pay back later." Jesus, pushed back against the devil in the wilderness, knowing that the shortcut did not end up at the same destination. Yes, Jesus deserved the acclaim of the crowds and the kingdoms. Yes, Jesus wished for reconciliation between heaven and earth that did not come at such a bloody price. Yes, Jesus desired to remount the throne of glory without passing through Gethsemane. But that would be an alternate reality. That would be a fairy tale in which "they lived happily every after" by bedtime. And we know it too.

The Greatest Seduction

But the last temptation was the hardest, wasn't it? No longer desperate, clear-headed and strong, Jesus seemed to be a double winner. That is precisely where evil brought its last seduction. "You have faith! You have great faith!" Trust God! Live as if it matters! Here is where the insidious call of the "health, wealth and success gospel" summons. Our Church is full of people, we are so right and blessed- God wants you to have it all! You don't have because you don't ask! Prove your faith by your works!

Yes, yes, yes. A young couple started worshiping with my first parish. They were members of a church in a nearby town, but they said they were looking for more; a bigger congregation, more young adults, more activities, more spirituality — more life — better preaching — sincere worship. So they came to join us. The other church must have been pretty small.

I met with them, wanting to get to know them. I also basked in the accolades they gave. I ate it up. Then came the hook. This couple had been married for more than two years but did not yet have children. They wanted to have babies, lots of them. They believed that they were destined to have a large family.

Here they were with me. Could I pray for them to get pregnant? After all, I was a "spiritual" man. They could see it! I prayed. I prayed fervently.

But the pregnancy did not happen. For whatever reason, they remained childless. In a short while, they disappeared from our community. Someone who knew them well said that they were now worshipping with another congregation where the new Vicar was a “ball of fire” and their needs could be better met. It was another place where they could prove their faith in an even more dynamic way.

The lure of success says to be pious! It says to have faith! Throw yourself into a dangerous situation, said the devil, and God will send angels to protect you! Success produces more success, financial wealth, numerical strength-the hallmarks of achievement and Godly status.

And still we have to live. There is something low-key and tame about how Jesus got through this wilderness wandering, just as it was for the Israelites even when they grumbled against their leaders. Keep walking. Keep trusting. And keep your faith. The tests continue. The exam is long. But God's grace abounds. Do you believe it? Do you really believe it? If you do, then you probably have already peeked into the world of Jesus' wisdom in the wilderness of temptations. For when the roll is called up yonder, the grades on the report cards that make it won't be A for excellent, B for good, or even C for nice try. The only grade that will make it will be G for grace.

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