

“An Opportune Time”
Gathered up in Jesus – part #1
from umcdiscipleship.org

Luke 4:1-14

[48] Being from Michigan, I have not spent much time in the desert. I’m not accustomed to the heat, the lack of water, or other dangers, which is why I still find it amusing that my wife and I spent our honeymoon in Phoenix, Arizona, in the beginning of June. We sweated through one hundred degree heat every day. The first morning we were there, I thought it would be a great idea to go mountain hiking up the east side of Camelback mountain, with one water bottle, for both of us. Katja literally saved our marriage by saying, “This isn’t the best time to go hiking. Let’s go back to the hotel pool.”

It’s reckless to go out into the desert without being prepared. And yet, many times we find ourselves in spiritual deserts in need of saving.

The times in my life when I was most severely tempted were those when I felt tired, alone, and even hungry. Those were the time I fell. And the times when I stood strong, resisting temptation and despair, were always those when I relied on the Christian friends, mentors, and family God provided.

Our souls all go through times in the desert. But they don’t have to end in failure. In fact, we may find that going through the desert and surviving, make us stronger and more faithful. How do we do it?

[49] Jesus, of course, spent plenty of time in the desert. The gospels tell us at the beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus spent forty days in the Judean desert, a wilderness with nothing: no food, no water.

Do you find it odd that Jesus was ever tempted? We usually think of Jesus as invincible. After all, Jesus was fully divine and fully human, the Son of God. Jesus performed so many miracles – he walked on water and rose from the dead. Why would the gospels highlight Jesus being tempted?

I believe the Bible teaches us this truth: before you can do something great, you have to have a time of training and purification. It was no accident that Jesus

spent exactly forty days in the desert. Moses and Elijah did the same thing. The gospels indicate that Jesus is even greater.

We know preparation is required to accomplish anything significant. That’s why we send our children to school, to college, to sports camps. I’m in the process of seeking ordination next year. That didn’t happen overnight. I’ve had twelve years of preparation, including local pastor’s school and seminary. I’ve met with mentors and cohort groups. The greater the task, the more preparation required. I read once that virtuosos spend over 10,000 hours training. Many people give up way before that.

So what does Jesus do in the desert, exactly? Not eating or sunbathing! Jesus is communing with his heavenly Father. Jesus prays for 40 straight days – 960 hours. Note Luke 4:2 says the devil tested him for forty days; I believe these last three tests were the hardest.

[50] Let’s consider these three temptations in order. #1 – The devil tells Jesus to make stones into bread. The devil says, “Go on. You’re hungry. Make some food!” This sounds like our temptation to snack when on a diet. This test hits Jesus at the core of his humanity. The devil implies Jesus does not have to suffer just because he is the incarnate Son of God. Jesus could use his power selfishly.

Fortunately for us, Jesus resists. He quotes scripture from Deuteronomy – Moses’ final speech. “We do not live on bread alone.” (Deut 8:3) When God provided manna in the desert to Moses and his people, Moses reminded his people to live on God’s word and promises.

[51] Temptation #2 – The devil tells Jesus, “Worship me, and I’ll give you everything you see!” The devil tempts Jesus with power and authority. This is another ill-advised short cut. Jesus, instead of going to the cross, could have it all in a flash. Who among us would love a little fame and fortune? The lure of money and power is not a contemporary invention.

Jesus escapes this second temptation with another quote from scripture, also from Moses. “Worship God alone.” (Deut 6:13) Jesus trusts in God’s plan and will not take the easy way out.

[52] In the final temptation, the devil taunts Jesus from the temple roof. “Throw yourself down, Christ. Be reckless. God will save you. Do you trust him?”

If you read the parallel passage in the Gospel of Matthew, you'll note the order of these last two trials are switched. Wouldn't the worst temptation be to worship the devil? Why does Luke put them in this order? I have a guess. We've noticed how Jesus uses scripture every time to resist the devil, but in Luke, the devil uses scripture in this final attempt to bring Christ down. The devil fights fire with fire. Obviously, the devil knows the bible, and even quotes from the Psalms (91:11-12).

I think we have all been tempted to think, “If God really loved me, then...” Yet, it is usually our own recklessness that put us in danger in the first place. Our own stubbornness, our own selfishness gets us in a jam, and we cry out to God, “Why did you do this?”

Look at how Jesus responds. Jesus knows God's love intimately. Jesus doesn't have to test that relationship. Forty days in the desert with God actually strengthened their relationship, not strained it. And so it is with little difficulty that Jesus uses scripture again. “No. Don't test God.” (Deut 6:16)

[53] There is a common thread in all three trials. Each time, Jesus draws strength from scripture. Which leads me to ask, how well do we know the Bible? I will freely admit, sometimes I get confused. Sure, I can tell you John 3:16, but most of the time, when I think of scripture, the numbers get a little fuzzy.

This is good news: Jesus didn't need to name the books. Chapters and verse weren't even invented until the printing press, anyway. Jesus simply knew what the scripture said. He pondered it in his heart. And most importantly, Jesus trusted in the One the scriptures revealed.

Can I ask: do you trust the Bible? Really trust it? The only way you can use the Bible to resist temptation is to actually know what the Bible says, which means reading it, studying it, and memorizing it, often. If Jesus needed to know the Bible to resist temptation, how much more do we?

[54] There is a prayer that goes, “Don't pray for an easy life. Pray to become a strong person.” Truth is, God will make us strong if we know scripture. That is a guarantee from 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV). “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” If we want to be thoroughly equipped, we had better read the instruction manual.

Still, some may say, “That’s not fair! The Bible is huge. Jesus only had the Hebrew Bible, and really, he only needed to know the first five books to get out of trouble.” I would suggest reading Deuteronomy does actually help us in many situations, but I won’t argue about what parts of the Bible are more valuable than others. Just read it and trust God to show you what you need.

[55] For example, take this verse: 1 Corinthians 10:13 (NIV): “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. 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 endure it.”

So if you claim, “I’m not Jesus. I can’t resist temptation,” this verse pretty much refutes that argument.

Or you could draw strength from this verse in Hebrews 4:15 (NIV)

[56] “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”

Does it help you to resist temptation, knowing that Jesus went through the same things you do? It helps me.

[57] We even have this amazing promise from James 4:7 (NIV):

“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

None of us want to fall to temptation. We pray for help every Sunday – “Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil (or the evil one).” However, it’s not enough to say “I don’t want to give in to temptation.” What we really need to say is, “I want my life to glorify God.” When we stay pure, God is glorified. If we focus only on our own needs, we are weak. Jesus resisted temptation through a loving relationship with his heavenly Father. So should we.

Our goal is to become followers of Christ. Christ suffered for us, showing us it is possible to live for God and resist temptation. Jesus showed us, by suffering for us, we are never alone.

[58] Lent is our opportune time, a time to intentionally put ourselves into a spiritual desert, a wilderness, a time of testing. You can make new habits, by giving up certain foods or luxuries, or by giving up complaining or worrying. We can strengthen our faith by committing to pray and meditate on scripture. Jesus

didn't just give up food and water in the desert – he reinforced his spiritual habits. He set the example for us.

If we want to make this Lent season worthwhile we have to make a choice – commit to follow Jesus and learn from his example, or try to resist temptation on our own. I know what choice I am making. I hope you do, too.

Let's pray.

DISMISSAL WITH BLESSING *by Taylor Burton Edwards*

May God, who has forgiven us,
now make us strong for these days ahead.
May Jesus lead us, and we be found faithful to follow.
May the Spirit drive us into the wilderness,
burning away the chaff of our lives,
and purifying our hearts for all to see
and be blessed.
And may the blessing of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Be with us and remain with us always!

Memory verse

Hebrews 4:15 (NIV)

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”

Reflection questions

1. What is the longest you've ever stayed awake, traveled, or gone without eating? How did you feel by the end of it?
2. Scripture teaches that Jesus was fully divine and fully human. How does that bring deeper meaning to this story?
3. Why did Jesus use scripture to refute the devil? Do you study the scriptures with the same purpose in mind?
4. What hope does this story give you for overcoming temptation?