

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

JESUS DEFEATS THE DEVIL'S TEMPTATIONS  
Luke 4:1-11; Lent 1C; March 8-9, 2025

Jesus' 40-day fast in the wilderness while being tempted by the devil has long been associated with the 40 days of Lent. Lent lasts from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday. All those days actually add up to 46, not 40. How can Lent be 40 days long? The answer is that Sundays are not counted, since Sunday is a feast day, not a fast day. We don't fast, that is, abstain from eating and drinking the Lord's Supper the Sundays in Lent.

Jesus fasted 40 days while being tempted by the devil. This led the Church to set aside Lent as a special time of fasting, abstaining from eating for a while. It is important to understand that fasting is not the same as starving ourselves. God created the human body to be able to function and even thrive while fasting.

When I decided to lose weight, I learned that the human body can burn two different types of fuel for energy: carbohydrates and sugars or fat. All the carbs and sugars we consume over and above what we can burn for energy at the time are converted into fat and stored in our bodies. If we stop consuming sugars and carbs our bodies will turn to our fat stores and burn them instead for energy. This is not starving ourselves since our bodies have all the stored energy they need to keep going, as long as they get enough water, vitamins and minerals while we are fasting.

That Jesus could fast for 40 continuous days, that is, not eat anything for 40 days, always made me wonder. Shouldn't that have killed Him? Not too long ago, there was a grossly obese man with hundreds of pounds of extra fat on his body, who stopped eating anything for over a year, while under the watchful care of his physician. He did not grow weak and die, but his body adapted to burning fat, even as he drank water along with necessary vitamins and minerals. He was much healthier after his year-long fast than before he started it.

Jesus did not fast to lose weight but used fasting as a discipline to focus His attention away from the things of the world to God, and to face the devil's temptations for our sake.

While Jesus fasted the devil took the opportunity to attack Him with temptations, thinking that Jesus was in a weakened state and more susceptible to sinning. I'm sure that Jesus was not obese going into His 40-day fast. Burning His fat reserves that whole time, Luke notes that He was hungry from it, though not starving to death. The devil assumed that his first temptation for Jesus to turn a stone into bread would be more powerful because of Jesus' fasting. The devil does not understand that fasting as a spiritual and physical discipline does not weaken us, but strengthens us.

While stuffing our faces with the world's delicacies and sweets, feeding our every desire and whim, we are at our weakest and most susceptible to the devil's temptations. If we are not disciplined against satisfying our sinful desires, saying "no" to what can harm us both spiritually and physically, we will be ripe for temptation and sin.

Even after a 40-day fast, Jesus was not starving to death and desperate for bread, carbohydrates which are complex sugars. What can so easily tempt us – wanting to satisfy ourselves by feeding all our physical desires – Jesus defeated. **Man shall not live by bread alone.** What causes us so often to fall into sin Jesus defeated on our behalf.

Fasting can be a useful discipline in a Christian's life. Jesus taught in the Ash Wednesday Gospel Reading from Matthew six, **"when you fast"** (Mt 6:16), not, "if you fast." It is a good thing to learn to resist, reject, and renounce those things that can harm us. Fasting from food teaches us to discipline our bodies to obey us, not rule over us, and this sort of discipline is necessary for all aspects of the Christian life.

St. Paul does not refer to fasting from food in Titus two, but teaches its spiritual nature: **For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce (say "No" to, NIV) ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works** (2:11-14).

After Jesus defeated this first temptation of turning a stone into bread, the devil went on with other temptations related to faith in God. The second temptation was to worship the devil in exchange for worldly authority and glory, as if that did not belong to God's Son already. The third temptation was for Jesus to throw Himself off the pinnacle of the temple to prove He was God's Son, whose angels would guard and protect Him from injury or death.

Jesus rightly feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things. The way of the world as suggested by the devil is to serve things to gain power and possessions, to worship the creature rather than the Creator. God's Word is clear. **"You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve"** (Dt 6:13). And while placing our lives into God's hands, we don't tempt God with foolish actions that endanger our lives or the lives of others. **"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test"** (Dt 6:16).

If Jesus had accepted any of these temptations, He would have sinned and forfeited the right to be God's holy sacrifice on the cross. He would no longer have been the spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, but just another sinful man in need of being saved from His own sins. The devil was tempting Jesus to avoid the work of suffering and dying God had given to Him in exchange for temporary worldly power and glory, and we would be lost forever.

We need to keep praying, **"and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,"** because we sin when tempted, and the evil one would like to keep us in his grasp and drag us to hell with him. In the midst of our failures we need a victory over sin, death, and the devil, and that is what we get in Jesus Christ. The very temptations we are so susceptible to falling to are the ones Jesus overcame for us.

The writer to the Hebrews points us to Jesus' temptations on our behalf that led to His suffering and death. **He Himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery... For because He Himself has suffered when tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted** (2:14-15, 18).

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I don't know about you, but I know that I need help when I'm being tempted. I struggle to discipline my flesh, which wants to avoid suffering and likes to be indulged. When given the choice between doing the hard thing, which is the right thing to do, and the easy thing which is sinfully wrong, the easy thing seems much more appealing especially as it promises to help us get ahead in this world.

The Epistle of James reminds us that the devil doesn't need to tempt us to sin because our own flesh is prone to that already. **But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death** (1:14-15). Our temptation is to think that slavery to sin means freedom when it is actually death.

Jesus saw temptations for what they were and dealt with them realistically. Jesus resisted them and the devil tempting Him, and chose to do the difficult, right thing for our sake. Jesus **endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God** (Heb. 12:2).

Hear this final word of encouragement through James for when we are being tempted: **Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him** (James 1:12). Amen.