

Passing the Test

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 | Psalm 32 | Romans 5:12-19 | Matthew 4:1-11

MATTHEW 4:1-11

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards 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 splendour; ⁹ and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' ¹⁰ 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.

INTRODUCTION

We will begin where Patrick left off last week, at Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai. Reaching back into the first few verses of Deuteronomy, I want to read what is, perhaps, my favourite passage:

These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan—in the wilderness, on the plain opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Dizahab. (By the way of Mount Seir it takes eleven days to reach Kadesh-barnea from Horeb.) In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses spoke to the Israelites just as the LORD had commanded him to speak to them.¹

I don't know if you caught it. It is easy to miss. In that second sentence, the author tells us that it is an 11-day journey from Horeb, from Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments and, as we heard last week, Patrick and eight others might have enjoyed a theophanic experience on the mountaintop, to Kadesh-barnea, an oasis on the southern border of Canaan, also known as the Promised Land. Let me say it again, it is an 11-day journey from Sinai to the doorstep of the Promised Land. And then verse three began: "*In the fortieth year...*" The fortieth year of this 11-day journey... which is how I suppose some of you feel if the sermon goes on too long. (In the third hour of his 18-minute sermon...)

As amusing as this opening to Deuteronomy is, it begs the question: How? How in the world did it take 40 years to complete an 11-day journey? Or why? Why did it take so long? And the simple answer is this, much like Jesus in the wilderness in our Gospel reading, the reading on which we will focus this morning, Israel was being tested. And as we shall see, unlike Israel, Jesus passed the test. And he does so in a way designed to teach us a lesson: Because he passed this test, Jesus Christ is our hope for passing the tests of this world. Because he passed this test, Jesus Christ is our hope for passing the tests of this world. Let's take a look.

¹ Deut 1:1-3.

1. THE SYMBOL OF THE TEST

The first thing we need to see is that Jesus is being intentionally portrayed here in relationship to the Israel of the Old Testament. A few pieces of data make this point. First, Matthew has been layering in this typology—where Israel is a type, a form, a shape, that anticipates an escalated fulfilment in Jesus Christ. From the flight to Egypt of the holy family in the Christmas narrative (a time that parallels Israel’s enslavement in Egypt), to the next chapter when Jesus will ascend a mountain to deliver a new law and demonstrate that he is the fulfilment of the Law (which beautifully parallels Moses on Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments), Matthew has carefully portrayed Jesus as the fulfilment of Israel throughout this whole section of his Gospel. Secondly, the language that Matthew uses is provocative. He begins by noting that Jesus was led by the spirit to the *wilderness*, a term for places of testing in the Old Testament, specifically where Israel journeyed for those many years between Sinai and the Promised Land.² Thirdly, and similarly, our translation reads that the devil *tempted* Jesus, which is a perfectly valid translation. But Matthew doesn’t mean tempted in the sense of something being enticing, such as Sachertorte is tempting (no it’s not, it’s gross—and I’ll happily fight with you about that after the service). He means tempted in a far more profound sense. Another valid translation is *tested*, the language repeatedly used of Israel’s trials in the desert. As the Psalmist puts it: “*How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert! They tested God again and again, and provoked the Holy One of Israel.*”³ Fourth, just as Israel spent forty years in the wilderness, so Jesus spent forty days. Fifth, the first temptation was that of bread in the face of great hunger, recalling the great miracle of manna from heaven as Israel starved in the wilderness.⁴ I could keep going, but suffice it to say, Matthew is showing how Jesus, like Israel, came into the wilderness to be tested.

2. THE SCHEME OF THE TEST

But not only did Jesus come to be tested, he passed the test. Whereas Israel famously murmured and grumbled, and consistently failed, so Jesus, the new Israel, the perfect representative, stood in opposition, not to God, but to the devil. And notice how he did it. Each time, his response comes with quotation.

The first test was hunger. Jesus fasted for forty days. And just in case you’re tempted to write this off as a supernatural being doing something supernatural, notice what Matthew adds: “*and afterwards he was famished.*”⁵ This wasn’t ‘Oh, I skipped breakfast and could really go for a sandwich famished.’ This is real hunger. This is I skipped breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the last six weeks famished. And the devil—the tempter or troublemaker from places like the book of Job, shows up with a simple, easy, and nearly-reasonable idea. ‘You’re God. Turn these rocks into bread.’ And Jesus, in exactly the same spot as Israel was in the wilderness, faced with the choice of relying on God for his provision or taking an easy way out, a not especially immoral or problematic way out—except that it follows the lead of the devil—responds. He quotes Deuteronomy: “*One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*”⁶

² See, for example, Exod 13:18.

³ Ps 76:41-42. See also Exod 15:25, 16:4, 17:7, 20:20; Deut 13:3, 33:8.

⁴ See Exodus 16 for this story.

⁵ Matt 4:2.

⁶ Deut 8:3.

This is important because it not only is Jesus passing the first test, he gives us insight into how he passes the test, how he withstands the temptations of the evil one. He relies on the Word of God, calling to mind that which will sustain him through the trials, demonstrating that he does, indeed, live according to the revealed Word of God.

And so, the second test comes. The devil, devious as he is, seeing how Jesus is going to battle, decided to come at Jesus with some Scriptures of his own. He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple—almost certainly in a vision—and challenges him to demonstrate his faith in God’s love for him by throwing himself down and letting the angels come to his rescue. The devil even quotes Psalm 91.⁷ Where the first test was that of convenience in the face of need, this one seems to appeal to Jesus’ piety. ‘Do you really trust the Bible you just quoted? Do you really have faith in God and his love for you? Prove it!’ the devil challenges him. Once again, Jesus calmly responds with Deuteronomy: *“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”*⁸ ‘I don’t have to play your game,’ Jesus tells him. My faith extends beyond your tests.

And then, the third test comes. Once again, the devil transports Jesus by vision to an impossibly high mountain with all the kingdoms of the world in view. And he offers them to Jesus in a test of desire for personal gain. As the Christ, ironically, Jesus is the rightful heir to all the kingdoms of the earth. Only his path was that of the cross. The devil, in a simple trade—one little act of worship for all the kingdoms of the earth—offers him his inheritance early. It rings of the fourth test that will come 23 chapters later as Jesus hangs there on the cross, as the mockers call out: *“If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!”*⁹ But there, as here, Jesus does not trade his own suffering for the reward to come. He does not compromise in order spare himself. He responds, again with Deuteronomy: *“Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”*¹⁰

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEST

Three times he was tested. Three times he passed. Where Israel consistently failed to rely upon God, to listen to his Word and heed his commands, to remain loyal to him, Jesus drew upon the Scriptures to withstand the temptations of the devil. And this is important to us for two reasons. Jesus’ demonstration here is both efficacious for us, and an example to us. Let me say that again. His passing the test in the wilderness is both efficacious, that is effective for us, and an example.

Efficacy: I am generally reluctant to read us, even as Christians, into the place of Jesus in the Gospels. Despite what my mom may tell you, I am not Jesus. And neither are you. So, while the testing of Jesus does provide an example, and we will get to that in a moment, I do not think that is the primary function here. Ultimately, this story is showing us that Jesus is the Christ, the appointed king of God’s people, and that his path is through the suffering and pain and turmoil and frustration and danger of testing. This was more than a temptation to sin for Jesus, this was a choice between being the suffering servant, the one who would ultimately go to the cross and die for his people, thus proving he is the true Messianic king, or he would take the easy way out, being satisfied to live comfortably in middle-management under the devil’s lead. But because he did not fail where Israel failed, because he passed the test, he proved he could

⁷ Ps 91:11-12.

⁸ Deut 6:16.

⁹ Matt 27:40.

¹⁰ Deut 6:13.

be the saviour of his people—this was efficacious. And on the cross, he proved that he was. And as such, he is the reason we need not despair when we fail, when we do not pass the test, when we give in to the temptation to sin. And make no mistake, this penitential season of Lent is a stark reminder of just that—we do fail. We are more like the grumbling, bumbling idiots of Israel than we care to imagine. We too easily trade in our discomfort for ease. We too easily trade in our actual devotion for fake acts of piety. We too easily trade in our loyalty to God and his revealed Word to create kingdoms of temporal pleasure for ourselves. In short, we rebel against God and give ourselves to evil—this is the definition of sin. And this is what we contemplate in this season of Lent. Yet, Jesus’ perfect obedience, even to the point of the cross, is the surest sign of our salvation through faith in him. In other words, he doesn’t just contrast with Israel in his obedience, but he represents us in righteousness we don’t deserve. We need simply to believe, to repent, to be contrite in our hearts and turn away from sin, and his salvation is ours. Nothing could be more comforting in our times of failure.

But of course, the question is how. How do we repent? How do we turn away from sin? The temptations keep coming. As the 1662 BCP baptismal service puts it, ‘the devil, the world, and the flesh’ do not relent. Jesus’ passing this test here is not only efficacious, it is an example of what it means to, in the words that we who are baptised regularly affirm—though again, I prefer the 1662 phrasing, that we would: “renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world with all covetuous desires of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow nor be led by them...”¹¹ How does Jesus do it? In those moments when comfort is the easy choice, when power is the enticing choice, when gratification is the attractive choice, when we can get away with it—no obvious consequences, just our little secret rebellions against God—when nothing could be easier than the wrong choice, how did Jesus pass the test? He relied on the Word of God. He drew upon his foundation of Scripture. And friends, those same Scriptures are available to us, just the same as his example here. He is, in every way, our hope of withstanding sinful temptation, our hope for passing the tests of this world.

CONCLUSION

I started today with the Scriptures, a look at the Israel in the wilderness, the biblical context of our Gospel passage. I will finish with another section of the Bible, when Paul later reflected on those tests in the wilderness. Learning from those stories, he tells the Christians in Corinth:

So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.¹²

May we rely upon Christ Jesus, our Saviour, our example, our hope of passing the test.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, help us to both believe in and follow in the footsteps of your Son, that we may be found standing in the time of trial. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹¹ *Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 347, 345.

¹² 1 Cor 10:12-13.