

THE OPENING BATTLE

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'"

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you

to guard you carefully;

they will lift you up in their hands,

so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

What is a champion? Normally we think a champion is someone who wins. We are in the middle of high school basketball playoffs. The playoffs are whittling down the teams until we have two who face each other in the state championship and only one will be crowned champion. But the word champion first had the idea of someone who fights for another. A prime example of that is David vs. Goliath. A Philistine by the name of Goliath challenged God's people to select one man in a fight to the death. At stake was the freedom of either the Philistines or the Israelites for Goliath added, ***"If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us."*** There was no one, not a one, among the Israelites willing to fight the giant, except the short shepherd boy, David. But, with God's strength, he killed the giant.

It says in John 8, ***"Everyone who sins is a slave to sin,"*** and in 1 John 3, ***"He who does what is sinful is of the devil."*** When Adam and Eve sinned, they became sinners and slaves to the devil. Anyone born of them is a slave to sin and the devil. There is no way we could lead a revolt to free ourselves from the devil. In fact, many like being his slaves. So God promised a champion, the seed of the woman who would crush the devil's head. When the time had come, this champion came, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. This morning we have the opening battle between our champion and the devil.

I. The opening battle of Jesus' fight.

"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry." Sometimes when I read something I skip what I think are insignificant details. Let's not do that here. We learn a lot with these opening words. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit. In other words, he went where God wanted him to go, into the desert, and did what God wanted him to do; he didn't eat for forty days. God put him in a vulnerable spot.

Now, the devil never plays fair. Instead of giving Jesus time to recover, he attacks. ***"The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'"*** Note that the name used here is devil and not Satan. Satan means enemy, devil means accuser. The devil remembered God's promise to crush his head. He also knew that if somehow he could accuse Jesus of sin, God's threat would become meaningless.

What a reasonable request the devil made of Jesus. Of course, as true God Jesus could turn stones into bread. And what is wrong with that? Surely God wouldn't want us to suffer more than we need, right? But do you see what the devil is doing here? He is trying to drive a wedge between Jesus and God. Remember, it was the Lord who led Jesus into the wilderness. It was the Lord who put him a position where he didn't eat for forty days! God promises to provide what a need, but not here, not for his own Son, the devil suggests. God can't be relied on. Ignore God. Ignore his promises.

"Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'" Jesus refused to doubt God. Yes, a loaf of bread right now would taste good and save his life. But what did Jesus need more than food? God's promise, his Word. He needed to trust God knew what he was doing leading him into the wilderness without food.

The devil's flank attack failed. But he persisted, ***"The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."*** In the first temptation, the devil tried to tempt Jesus to ease his hungry stomach. Now he comes with a temptation that promises to take all suffering out of his life. He offered Jesus all the power and glory of the kingdoms of this world. Then Jesus would not have to shed a single drop of blood. But this was a lie, too. First, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. So the world isn't something the devil can give away.

Second, only God is worthy of praise so he relied on God's Word. ***"Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"***

The devil's rear attack failed. So he decides to attack Jesus in an all out frontal assault. ***"The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down from here. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"*** "If you are going to rely on God's Word, Jesus, prove to me that it is true." Sounds reasonable, doesn't it? You want to buy a new car. You read up on it. You know that this is the car you want, but at the dealership you still take it for a test drive just to make sure. What an opportunity for Jesus to shut the devil up once and for all. But, ***"Jesus answered, 'It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*** Jesus doesn't need proof that God will keep his promises. Besides, God has provided a nice staircase for him to walk down.

"When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time." When I was a kid, I thought Jesus was tempted only three times. Lucky Jesus. No, God recorded these three. Jesus was tempted all forty days in the wilderness, in fact, numerous times each day. The devil never missed an opportunity, but the outcome was always the same: defeat for Satan, victory for Jesus.

But these were only skirmishes, the opening battle. It was on the cross where the battle ended and the war was won. When he cried, ***"It is finished,"*** it was finished. The devil's head was crushed, as it says in 1 John 3, (1 John 3:8) ***"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."***

II. The opening battle of our fight.

But this was not Jesus' fight. He fought our battle. As Hebrews says, ***"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."*** Jesus came to destroy the devil's power and free us from him and the fear of death. By faith in Christ, we share in his victory. We belong to God and nothing can separate us from God's love, not even the devil. But he will try.

In basketball, a team that is down by a few points in the last minute or seconds of the game need to get the ball back. In order to do this they will try to make the leading team make a mistake. So, they press them; they pressure the ball handler. They may even foul them hoping they'd miss the free throws. The devil can't take us away from God, but he will tempt us to leave God, to make a mistake.

But do not fear. As David faced Goliath with confidence, we can face the devil's temptations. How? As Jesus did, with God's Word. Paul tells us in Ephesians to wield the sword of the Spirit, that is, the Word of God. The devil may not tempt you to turn stones into bread. But there will be times when we are hungry or lonely or sick or depressed, and the devil will come and ask "if," "If you are really a child of God, then why don't you have what you want?" He may not offer you the entire world, but at least a portion of it only if you exchange your love and devotion to God for it. And he may even try to twist and turn the Bible passages to confuse us.

When he tempts you, take a page out of Jesus' book and remember God's promise that man does not live on bread alone but on every Word of God. But the Word of God isn't some sort of magical incantation; say the words and the devil leaves. No, it is faith or trust in God's Word that makes him run. Jesus trusted God so he didn't have to turn stone into bread or jump from the high place. All he needed was God's Word. That's all we need.

To that end, keep learning the Word. Look at the opportunities you have: worship, bible class, Sunday school, at home, devotions on our webpage, the Forward in Christ magazine, Portals of Prayer, Meditations. But don't just read; believe. The devil will lie. Treat him as a liar. You have God's Word on it. This week we will kick off a week celebrating that we have a Lutheran elementary school. No, this school wasn't started as an alternative. We have schools so we can arm those kids with God's Word above and beyond what they get at home and church. After reading our text for today, that makes sense, doesn't it.

And if we do succumb to his temptations and sin, do not despair. Jesus promised, ***"whoever comes to me I will never drive away."*** Remember, devil means accuser. When he does lead us into sin and accuses us of it, even then he lies for God so loved the world, and you, that he gave up his son into death so that you will not perish but have eternal life. This sin, too, is forgiven.

Let this text assure you that Jesus is your champion. He fought and defeated the devil for YOU! We no longer belong to the devil but to God. The devil is defeated, but he still prowls around like a lion. But even the weakest of people, armed with God's Word and promises is stronger than the devil. INJ Amen.