



## STRONGER

By Rev. Will Nelken

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*Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, CA, on Sunday, May 1, 2022*

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Each record of this season of testing says the same thing: the Spirit took Jesus there... to be tempted by the devil.

Many, I suppose, have wondered, as a result, if they could trust the Holy Spirit (Would He bring them to such a test?). The answer, in short, is yes.

He *will* bring you to it. AND He *will not* leave your side. In every test and trial, though it may *feel* as if you've been abandoned to the tempter, the Spirit of Christ will be with you, just as Paul encouraged the believers in Corinth, Greece:

*"God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13)*

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*"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you." (Isaiah 43:2)*

What could have prepared Jesus for such a season—40 days and nights in the wilderness (a barren land full of wild beasts) without food?

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*After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."* (Matthew 3:13-17)

Note the verbal affirmation.

God loves what He has made; He calls it good. We take it from Him, and twist it. We drop it and break it. We make a mess of it. But He loves it so much that He's willing to repair it, to reform it.

We may think, "I can still see where it was cracked, where it was broken." But even with the scars, the result is stronger than the original. And the scars are the evidence that God had a hand in its remaking.

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But He had this: *"My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."* Before He had done anything to prove Himself. He had not yet died on the cross for the sins of the world. Yet, He heard this. Booming from the heavens. Shaking the earth where He stood. Filling His heart with unmerited favor and unconditional love.

*Beloved child.*

First, the tribute, then the test.

Are you a follower of Christ? Have you heard the Father's affirmation? Do you know who you are? Do you know you are loved by God? You, too, are His beloved!

Paul called the Thessalonian believers *"brothers and sisters loved by God."*

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Regardless of everything that you've done wrong, if you put your trust in the story of Jesus and claimed Him as your Rescuer and Leader—the One worthy of your worship—then you have done the one thing most needful. And your trust in Jesus is the key to your new life—as the beloved of the Father.

Jesus prayed to the Father with these words: *“So that the world will know that You sent Me, and You have loved them just as You have loved Me.”* (John 17:23)

When you’ve heard that... when you know that in your spirit... you can go anywhere with Him, you can face anything with Him, you can do anything He asks of you. Soaking in that kind of love is *vital* to meeting the challenges of life head-on.

*“We do not have a high priest incapable of sympathizing with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin.”* (Hebrews 4:15)

Well... in every way...? (Really?)

*Luke 4:1 Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 4:2 where for forty days He endured temptations from the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they were completed, He was famished. 4:3 The devil said to Him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” 4:4 Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man does not live by bread alone.’ ”*

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When we think of “every way” we have been tempted, I doubt that these three temptations ever come up.

We recall the day and time of our temptations, where we were and in what physical position and condition, the implements of our pain, and the individuals who wielded them. It’s all so painfully specific.

How could Jesus have experienced *that*?

*“For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.”* (Hebrews 2:18)

From our birth, God has planted within us seeds of life, in the form of desires and dreams for personal fulfillment, and gifts and abilities to reach them. But the devil tries to use those same desires and dreams (and others he concocts) against us (and against God's plan for our lives), by suggesting that we fulfill them on our own, by our own effort, for our own satisfaction, because God cannot be trusted to take care of us—His love just isn't enough. He lies. A lot.

If we peel away the superficial specifics, we'll discover something universal about the temptations Jesus faced.

They were similar to the three temptations that Eve faced... Although she was not in a wilderness, but a garden—a place of abundant fruitfulness. But, again, strip away the specifics...

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<sup>7</sup> Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

"Good for food" (like bread) to satisfy the appetite of the body.

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"To make one wise" to feed her pride (like dramatic acts) with a sense of specialness.

And these are the same three temptations that John warned of...

*1 John 2:15* Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup> For all that is in the world, the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. <sup>17</sup> The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the person who does the will of God lives forever.

Instead of three temptations, consider them three categories of temptation, three examples of "having it your way," three false identities (masks) we may adopt for ourselves, three ways the secular world (without God) suggests to create value for human beings.

Temptation #1: I am what I do (performance) — turn stones into bread.

We are challenged with “How have you demonstrated your usefulness? What have you done? Have you made a name for yourself?”

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What do you have to show for yourself? Nothing!

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You are more than what you eat, and more than what you produce.

God made you and God loves you, as you are. That doesn’t mean He condones all you’ve done or will leave you as you are, But the starting point is His loving affirmation. You have value because God made you, and His love is sealed by your trust in Jesus.

Today, we have eaten another kind of bread. Bread to feed and fill the soul. The life of Christ in you.

Jesus responded:

*“It is written, ‘You are to worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.’ ”*

You are more than what you have. The things you seem to lack, or the abilities you seem to lack, do not diminish your value to God who made you. You are precious in His sight.

If you *“seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness,”* He will add to your life everything that you truly need.

And you, like Paul, *“can do everything God requires, through Christ who gives you strength.”*

The gifts of the Spirit will take you places you thought you would never go. He is all you need!

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*they* lack the capacity. But God will love you always, and forever. You don't need to prove yourself to Him. You just need to practice faithfulness. He's not keeping score.

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We require just what Jesus required:

1. To know, before we begin (and after every failure), that we are loved by the Father, just as Jesus was. Regardless of achievements, or lack thereof. You may hate yourself, but God still loves you. And that's your ticket back to wholeness.
2. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit. You cannot do life well on your own. Your efforts to prove otherwise are like spitting into the wind. Pride is not a sure foundation. Ask Jesus to fill you with the Holy Spirit. Don't settle for less. He is your ticket to victory.



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How could Jesus have experienced *that*?

*“For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.”* (Hebrews 2:18)

From our birth, God has planted within us seeds of life, in the form of desires and dreams for personal fulfillment, and gifts and abilities to reach them. But the devil tries to use those same desires and dreams (and others he concocts) against us (and against God's plan for our lives), by suggesting that we fulfill them on our own, by our own effort, for our own satisfaction, because God cannot be trusted to take care of us—His love just isn't enough. He lies. A lot.

If we peel away the superficial specifics, we'll discover something universal about the temptations Jesus faced.

They were similar to the three temptations that Eve faced... Although she was not in a wilderness, but a garden—a place of abundant fruitfulness. But, again, strip away the specifics...

*Genesis 3:1* Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?"

<sup>2</sup> The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; <sup>3</sup> but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'"

<sup>4</sup> The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! <sup>5</sup> "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

<sup>6</sup> When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

<sup>7</sup> Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

"Good for food" (like bread) to satisfy the appetite of the body.

"Delight to the eyes" (like possessions) to fill the desire for beauty.

"To make one wise" to feed her pride (like dramatic acts) with a sense of specialness.

And these are the same three temptations that John warned of...

*1 John 2:15* Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup> For all that is in the world, the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. <sup>17</sup> The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the person who does the will of God lives forever.

Instead of three temptations, consider them three categories of temptation, three examples of "having it your way," three false identities (masks) we may adopt for ourselves, three ways the secular world (without God) suggests to create value for human beings.



Temptation #1: I am what I do (performance) — turn stones into bread.

We are challenged with “How have you demonstrated your usefulness? What have you done? Have you made a name for yourself?”

Temptation #2: I am what I have (possessions) — the glory of the kingdoms.

What do you have to show for yourself? Nothing!

\$15 billion is spent annually in the United States to tell you what you’re missing, what you need to buy.

Temptation #3: I am what others think (popularity) — leap from the pinnacle, because you’re important.

Gain visibility through dramatic acts or pretense. Otherwise, you’re nobody!

In the face of such pervasive godless pressure to find your value and identity in deeds and things and people, consider once more what Jesus demonstrated...

*“It is written, ‘Man does not live by bread alone.’ ”*

You are more than what you eat, and more than what you produce.

God made you and God loves you, as you are. That doesn’t mean He condones all you’ve done or will leave you as you are, But the starting point is His loving affirmation. You have value because God made you, and His love is sealed by your trust in Jesus.

Today, we have eaten another kind of bread. Bread to feed and fill the soul. The life of Christ in you.

Jesus responded:

*“It is written, ‘You are to worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.’ ”*

You are more than what you have. The things you seem to lack, or the abilities you seem to lack, do not diminish your value to God who made you. You are precious in His sight.

If you *“seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness,”* He will add to your life everything that you truly need.

And you, like Paul, *“can do everything God requires, through Christ who gives you strength.”* The gifts of the Spirit will take you places you thought you would never go. He is all you need!

Jesus answered:

*“It is said, ‘You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”*

You are more than what others think of you. You needn’t go to dramatic lengths to impress people. Nor collapse when they’re unimpressed. Some people will never love you—because

*they* lack the capacity. But God will love you always, and forever. You don't need to prove yourself to Him. You just need to practice faithfulness. He's not keeping score.

What will it take for us to conquer OUR temptations?

We require just what Jesus required:

1. To know, before we begin (and after every failure), that we are loved by the Father, just as Jesus was. Regardless of achievements, or lack thereof. You may hate yourself, but God still loves you. And that's your ticket back to wholeness.
2. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit. You cannot do life well on your own. Your efforts to prove otherwise are like spitting into the wind. Pride is not a sure foundation. Ask Jesus to fill you with the Holy Spirit. Don't settle for less. He is your ticket to victory.