

"The Stone in Temptation"—Matthew 4:1-4

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, "The Stone in Temptation", is Matthew 4:1-4 → *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But He answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Suffering. For many people the season of the church year called Lent is all about suffering. The focus on the suffering of Jesus throughout His earthly ministry embodies His humiliation. He was rejected by a majority of the religious leaders constantly seeking for a way to kill Him. When the time came for them to carry out their plans the physical suffering inflicted upon Him was so brutal the prophet Isaiah said *His appearance was . . . marred, beyond human semblance.* (cf. Isaiah 52:14) This suffering climaxed in experiencing hell for us by bearing the sin of the whole world upon Himself, expressed in His

Father forsaking Him.

It is this suffering which has led many Christians throughout the centuries to view Lent as their time to suffer with Jesus. Focusing on their own sins which took Jesus to that cross, the whole forty day Lenten journey is supposed to be somber instead of joyful. Many will talk about giving up something for Lent—usually giving up some kind of food—as a way to recognize the suffering of Jesus or even feel as if they are suffering with Him. Such practices are drawn from details of Jesus' preparation . . . or shall I say being prepared . . . for His public ministry during forty days in the wilderness.

Over a period of forty days Jesus was *tempted by the devil* in the wilderness. He came face to face with the temptations of the devil who used stones in an effort to foil God's plan for our salvation. Verse 2 of our text says Jesus had been *fasting forty days and forty nights*, which naturally made Him very *hungry*. Being very weak physically, He was also physically vulnerable to the devil's first attempt to destroy our salvation. Thus, appealing to His immense hunger satan placed before Jesus some *stones* accompanied with a challenge: *If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.* (verse 3)

Satan's best way to get a foothold in temptation is to make you focus on your suffering in the midst of struggles and pain. In this way you are focused

on yourself and fail to see both the devil's tempting you to sin and the LORD at work through your trial. This leaves you defenseless to say the least. Why? Because it gives in to the devil's challenge of demanding proof on his terms that Jesus is the Son of God. His temptations lead us to doubt the Person & Work of Jesus. Ever heard anyone challenge the LORD in the midst of suffering and pain with statements which begin, "If You are God how could You . . .?"

You see this same temptation show it's ugly face at the foot of Jesus' cross. Judge for yourselves who was speaking when Matthew 27:39-40 says *those who passed by derided Him, wagging their heads and saying . . . "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."* Sound familiar? It should. It was the same challenge place by the devil as the hungry Jesus looked at some stones. Jesus always knew His enemy was the devil. The cause of Jesus' suffering was not the people who nailed Him to the cross. It was satan.

At the same time, another "cause" is at work in this temptation. Notice how Jesus ended up in this difficult situation with the devil—He *was led up **by the Spirit** into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.* (Verse 1) Much more was at stake for Jesus in this wilderness experience. While it may appear that He was being led by the devil in actuality **He was being led by the Spirit** through a period of testing. What was at stake for Jesus as His stomach growled over

a stone or two was **your eternal salvation**. His obedience in this time of testing-temptation was necessary to secure your perfect relationship with God! If Jesus would have given in to the devil's temptations He would have failed the test of Yahweh and forfeited your salvation. You would have been left defenseless.

Temptation and testing actually go hand in hand. Think about it. Each of these experiences involve struggle, suffering and even some form of pain much of the time. Many a Christian has labored over determining whether they're being tempted by the devil or tested by the LORD in a given experience or situation. Most people approach these two concepts as mutually exclusive. After all, it doesn't make sense for God and the devil to be working through the same experience . . . or does it? The devil certainly wouldn't be working here in "God's house" right now to make anyone focus on their "suffering" through this sermon . . . or would he!? The LORD certainly wouldn't be working here in His "house" right now to test anyone's faithfulness to Himself during this sermon . . . or would He!? Testing and temptation are both involved in the struggles of our lives everyday.

Jesus experienced what we all experience—periods of trial in the midst of sinfulness which test our faith, within which satan strives to get a foothold to destroy our faith. So the challenge is not for us to determine whether we're

being tested or tempted, which is just another mis-focus of the devil. The challenge is to keep the Person & Work of Jesus in clear focus and let the Spirit take care of the outcome!

Jesus focused His attention on something much more solid than a stone or two which could provide physical relief by His divine power. He submitted Himself to the written Word of God to “pass the test” and continued accomplishing **your** forgiveness of sins and salvation! Verse 4 of our text tells us that Jesus *answered, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”* With every attack of the devil Jesus focused on and submitted to the very written Scriptures over which He Himself was Lord! The Spirit leads through the written Word of God, which Ephesians 6 describes amidst the armor of God as *the sword of the Spirit*. (cf. Ephesians 6:17)

As God leads us by His Holy Spirit through the written Word He allows our faith to be tested by trials within which temptations come. The Spirit gives you discernment in the midst of your suffering. You will recognize that a temptation is something which the devil places before you to lead you away from faith in Jesus. It is meant to destroy your faith in Christ. At the same time you will acknowledge that a trial is something which the Lord allows you to undergo in order to help you become more mature in your faith in Christ. It is meant to

confirm your faith in Jesus.

This is why James 1:2-4 tells us to *count it all joy . . . when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.* Only the Holy Spirit can produce joy in a person while suffering and experiencing temptation at the same time! It was after the disciples received the Holy Spirit that they rejoiced when suffering persecution for the name of Jesus! (cf. Acts 5:41)

Instead of focusing so completely on our suffering during testing so that we fail to identify the temptations which the devil places before us, we can focus on Christ's endurance and His victory **as the testing brings us to Him!** Hebrews 4:14-16 encourages us to consider this temptation of Jesus in the midst of our trials. It says: *Since then we have a great high priest Who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest Who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one Who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

You deal with testing-temptation properly by trusting in Christ's victory during His testing-temptation in the wilderness. Simply being who you are in

Christ, focused on the victory over the devil which He won for you during His time of testing, is the Spirit's way to produce the victory and endurance of Jesus in you. Then you need not fear either the testing of your faith nor the tempting attacks upon your faith because your faith rests completely on the foundation of the tested stone, Jesus Christ! Amen.

This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

*“See, I lay a stone in Zion, **a tested stone,**
a precious cornerstone **for a sure foundation;**
the one who trusts will never be dismayed.*

(Isaiah 28:16 NIV)