

Today we're going to look at two key events that prepare the way & prepare Jesus' heart for all that follows in his 3 years of ministry. Those events are Jesus' baptism & Jesus' testing in the desert. And then next week, in part two, we are going to carry on into Luke 4 to look at the 1st public sermon that Jesus ever gives - a message so provocative that it almost results in Jesus being killed, even before he has really begun. And I've broken up this morning's message into 5 stanzas.

1. WE ARE ALL BEING FORMED & SHAPED IN A GREAT SPIRITUAL BATTLE

So let's now look at **these two events**, the powerful moment when **Jesus has his calling & identity affirmed**, followed by **that critical moment** when the evil one attempts to lure Jesus away from his mission, and tries to seduce him on to an easier and less costly path.

Our story opens with **Jesus being baptised** by John, & the heavens open & that voice of affirmation comes & says "*you are my son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased*", & Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, then immediately leaves the cool waters of the river Jordan, & is taken to the burning sands of the Judean desert.

He has just come from this **incredible experience of encountering the Father & the Spirit** at his baptism, an encounter in which **his sonship** has been confirmed, **& the love & presence** of the Father & the Spirit with him has been re-affirmed. And from that great spiritual height, he now finds himself **in a place of thirst & hunger and under attack**.

And I think many of us here have **tasted something similar** to this in our following of Jesus – we've had some powerful experience of God – perhaps at a camp, or in our own baptism, or sometime when God has really used us - **& then 'boom'** – there's a counter attack, & things fall flat or fall apart & we are left wondering what has gone wrong.

But in this passage, we learn from the life of Jesus that while we of course **grow in** those places of powerful **encounter with** God –we also need to learn how to *grow in* those places of **hardship & trial & testing** where God seems distant.

We also see here that being filled with the Holy Spirit does not mean we will escape being tested – & actually quite the opposite - **being empowered by the Holy Spirit means we will come into spiritual conflict**. But the good news is that the Spirit & the Scriptures equip us & prepare us for that conflict, just as they prepared Jesus.

Luke sets the scene for this passage by telling us that Jesus was in the desert without food for **40 days, constantly being tested**. Those of you who know your Bible's well will recognise that the number 40 is one that reoccurs over & over through Scripture. It's a number that is associated with the idea of **trial & testing**.

Moses fasted and prayed 40 days on Mt Sinai when he had that incredible encounter with God in the book of Exodus, while ironically, at the foot of that same mountain, the rest of the Hebrews had been **seduced into worshipping** an idol of gold.

Even more significantly for this passage, the 40 days and nights are a reminder of **the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert** after they left their captivity in Egypt & before they could enter that promised land. And of course the tragedy for them was that when they were tested, they failed – **they grumbled against God, they complained about how hard it was, & they stopped trusting God** - and so they never got to enter the Promised Land (it was only the next generation that did).

And here we have **Jesus, in a sense re-enacting that 40 year struggle**, compressed into 40 days – tested & tempted over & over (not just the last three temptations that we get to see) – but **staying faithful** to God & the mission & calling God had given him, **so that we, his people could follow him** into the promised land that God has given us – which is the Kingdom of God.

Now often when we read a passage like this we have this image of Jesus, the son of God, **God incarnate**, as someone **who can easily blow off the powers of evil**. And we forget that in his incarnation, Jesus, as it says in Philippians 2:6-9, totally emptied himself & gave up his equality with God, and became **fully 100% human**. And so after 40 days and nights of fasting in that desert, assailed by every temptation, fear and doubt the devil could throw at him, Jesus would have been incredibly **weak and exhausted**, & would have been **relying on the power of the Holy Spirit**, just as we must.

And **the first temptation** the devil confronts him with is a very obvious one to throw at a man who is hungry & claims to be the son of God: *“If you are the son of God, turn these stones into bread”*

Now this is a **two-fold attack** isn't it? As well as attacking Jesus physical needs, he is attacking Jesus' **sense of identity**, that identity he has had conferred on him at his baptism, when God said *“you are my beloved son”*

‘Oh really? Is that really who you are? Well if you are – do a miracle & meet your own needs’.

And I wonder if the devil said a few other things to Jesus as well that aren't recorded here – like, *“if you start turning rocks into bread, the masses will flock to you. If you will just feed people's bellies with a click of your fingers, you'll be a rock-star messiah with a million followers in no time”.*

But Jesus resists this temptation to become some kind of **divine vending machine**, countering the devil with a quote from Deuteronomy that *“human beings cannot live on bread alone, but”* as Matthew's version adds – *“but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”.*

In other words, **we are spiritual beings** & yes we do need food for our bodies, but we need more than that – we need food for our souls, we need meaning, we need purpose, we need direction, we need love, & above all we need relationship.

The **second temptation**, in Luke's version, comes when Satan in an instant shows Jesus all the Kingdoms & empires of the world – **with all their pomp & glory, with all their wealth and power, with all their great armies and navies and palaces and parliaments** – and says

“I will give you all their authority and splendour; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. ⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours.”

I mean, **what a temptation.** Jesus - *‘why spend the next three years sweating it out & living with these grubby, ignorant people who will never fully get you anyway? Why spend the next three years trying to explain & enact your Kingdom before a bunch of peasants who will only let you down, in fact one of them will betray you? And why go through the agony of being whipped and nailed to a cross & being mocked & spat upon - why do all that when I can give you all the Kingdoms of the world right here right now?’*

‘Why take the path of weakness and suffering when I can give you strength & power right now?’ (Whispers) – ‘Jesus – I can give you a shortcut to power, wealth and glory. Why wait? Why struggle?’

And **Jesus resists**, quoting again from Deuteronomy, **from Moses when he’s exhorting the children of Israel in the desert** – saying *“No. Worship the Lord your God & serve him only”*

So the devil moves on to **the 3rd test**, taking Jesus to Jerusalem, the centre of Israel’s political and economic power, & he takes Jesus to the highest point of the temple, & the temple of course is **the seat of Jerusalem’s economic, political and religious power** – that vast & magnificent temple complex, for the people of Israel was **like Wall Street, the White House & the Vatican** all rolled into one - & he says *“Jesus, if you are the son of God, throw your self down from here & in front of all these people God’s angels will catch you & carry you to the ground”*

And again, Satan is **questioning Jesus’ sense of identity**, saying *‘if you are the son of God’* & challenging Jesus to prove it to him & to himself & to the world – *I mean if God really loves you, if you throw your self off here, God & his angels will surely save you – won’t they?*

And again Satan is offering Jesus **the chance to short-cut his calling and become an instant rock – star Messiah.** If he jumps, & the angels catch him & float him down into the temple court yards, the people will have **no option & no choice but to acclaim him** as the Messiah, & fall down & worship him. He’ll be able to force a **take over the temple** and throw out Caiaphas & Annas & all those corrupt Pharisees & those useless Sadducees; **he will control the seat of military, economic & religious power in Israel**, & he’ll have an army of adoring followers ready to do anything he says.

And again Jesus rejects this path, this way of the all-conquering messiah, by quoting from Deuteronomy, & saying *‘Never put the Lord your God to the test’.*

Now in terms of **personal application**, each of the tests Jesus faces are the same ones we will face too. **Our sense of identity as God’s sons & God’s daughters will be attacked.** The devil will do all in his power to make us **doubt that we are God’s beloved.** We too will be tempted to put our own wants & ambitions ahead of the call of God on our lives. And we too will be tempted, over & over, **to choose compromise & ‘the path of least resistance’** on one side, or the path of self-glorification on the other, over the way of struggle & obedience. **But it’s in these hard places that our character & spirituality & our Christlikeness are really formed**

2. JESUS WAS THE FREESEST HUMAN BEING WHO EVER LIVED

You know **MLK** once said “*a person is only free to the extent that they are free from the love of wealth & from the fear of death*”. And this is in part where Jesus’ freedom came from.

Jesus was the most free human being who ever lived.

The love of **money** had no hold on him.

The fear of **death** had no hold on him.

The **acclaim** of the crowds had no hold on him,

& the need to **look successful & powerful** had no hold on him;

the **fear of rejection** had no hold on him.

And because of that, Jesus was free, **completely free** to do exactly what He felt God was asking him to do, & to live a life of love & obedience.

3. TO THE EXTENT THAT WE ARE FREE FROM THE POWER OF SIN, WE ARE FREE.

And Jesus wants us to live in this same freedom. In John 8:31-36 Jesus says

³¹ “*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*”

³³ *They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”*

³⁴ *Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

You see here Jesus talking about **sin & freedom as opposite forces**. Those things which stop us finding freedom in life – anything that brings us into **bondage & addiction**, that which breaks down our **relationships** with each other & with God, those things that stop us being **the people God created us to be** – this the Bible calls **sin**.

Gerald May, the author, psychologist & spiritual director, **defines sin** as that which “*turns us away from love - away from love for ourselves, away from love for one another, and away from love for God*”.

In his wonderful book, **Addiction & Grace**, May says, contrary to what some of us have been taught, the answer to sin is not “*to try harder*” & to “*try to be better*” – but the answer is **surrender to grace**. Grace he says “*is the most powerful force in the universe*”, the one force that can overcome every power that seeks to oppress the human heart.

One of the reasons we often **wrestle & wrestle with our sin** & take this “*must try harder*” approach, is that so often we define sin simply as **a moral problem** & as moral rules we have broken. But when we do that **we are hugely underestimating the power of this force called sin** – and Gerald May reminds us that sin is not primarily a moral problem **but a spiritual power that seeks to drag us down into addiction, into brokenness, & despair**, and the only way to fight it is with **a greater power** – and that greater power is **grace & forgiveness & the unconditional love of Jesus**.

4. JESUS WANTS US TO LIVE LIVES OF FREEDOM AND GRACE

The whole reason Jesus came & lived & died was to set us free – all of us – from the power of sin & from everything that would rob us of the freedom of being the children of God.

1 John 3:8

⁸ *the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.*

5. JESUS GIVES US THE ARMOUR & RESOURCES TO OVERCOME SIN & EVIL

The good news is that Jesus doesn't just give us wise & comforting words in this struggle with sin, & in this battle with the powers of evil. He really does equip us & equip us well for this spiritual conflict we find ourselves in

2 Cor 10:4 says

⁴ *The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world – they are not guns or bombs or fists, or shouting & screaming, but ones that have the power to demolish evil strongholds.*

In Ephesians 6:10-18 - Paul elaborates further, saying

¹⁰ *be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.* ¹¹ *Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.* ¹² *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* ¹³ *Therefore put on the full armour of God ...* ¹⁴ *Stand firm, with the belt of **truth** buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of **righteousness & justice** in place,* ¹⁵ *and with your feet fitted with the **readiness** that comes **from the gospel of peace**.* ¹⁶ *In addition to all this, take up **the shield of faith**, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.* ¹⁷ *Take the **helmet of salvation (the hope of salvation – 1 Thess 5:8)** and **the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God**.* ¹⁸ *And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, **be alert** and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.*

Now it's easy to dismiss this passage as **quaint ancient imagery**, but in my personal experience these are **real and powerful tools** that the Spirit of God has given us to push back against the powers of oppression & anti-freedom with.

In the years immediately after Susan & I returned from Cambodia, I went through the worst trials & the hardest testing I have ever been through. The work & the organisation that Susan & I had spent 16 years setting up in Cambodia was being demolished before our eyes by the **corruption** of a few; friends we had worked with in Cambodia who were trying to stand against this were receiving **death threats, losing their jobs & being run out of town**; my health began to collapse, & I was diagnosed in 2014 with **lymphoma** - & at one point they took a **bone marrow biopsy** from me & said **90%** of the cells in my bone marrow were cancer cells.

All hell was breaking loose.

And I must admit, up until then my own approach to **prayer & spiritual warfare** had been **pretty casual & pretty easy-ozy**. But **too many inexplicably bad things** were happening for me to believe that these were purely natural problems. And at that time, with the help of some of you here, I started to **get very serious about putting this armour on**, & about

enlisting others to pray for me & with me, & **we started pushing back against these powers & principalities that Paul talks of.**

I started to make sure that **the core of my being**, my inner-most being that Psalm 51 talks of, was committed to **truth & transparency**; I started to make sure that **my heart** was covered with a **desire** for nothing but **justice & righteousness**; I started to make sure that **my mind & my thinking** were being moulded by **salvation**, & by **the hope of salvation** as 1Thess 5:8 puts it; I started to ensure my **feet** were ready to **make peace, to forgive & be reconciled** with those I had been at war with; & I would **daily** & consciously ask God & trust God to put **a shield around me & to protect me**, just as he promises to do; I started to call in those promises in the word, and I started to much more **proactively seek God for his word, his living word**, concerning the situation I was in, & what I should do about it.

Friends, this armour of God is powerful & effective, & I encourage you to put it on often.

And I'm still in this battle, but God has done good things in my life since then, & I'm still moving forward. Because God wants me & you to be free of oppression; indeed, **wherever oppression & injustice & darkness exists in the world**, God longs to break through & to bring liberation & freedom - **& he wants to use you & me to bring it. And we've read the end of the Book, and we know that ultimately the kingdom of God does come, in all its power & glory & fullness.**

As I finish this message today – we're going to do a couple of things. I'd like you to **think of one thing** that's going on in your life at the moment that you want **freedom from**. It could be any of the things we have talked about this morning or something else that is a personal struggle for you. I want you to think of it & as we pray together, & I want you to offer it to God as **we pray the Lord's prayer together** – and lets be really aware of those last three lines that say : **lead us not into temptation,**

**but deliver us from the evil one,
for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever**

And lets pray

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our sin,

as we also have forgiven those who have sinned against us.

¹³ **And lead us not into temptation,**

but deliver us from the evil one,

for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen

