

Part 1: Temptation in Our Bones

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Imagine you're on Jeopardy, and it's the final round and the question you need to answer to walk home a winner is this: "What is the tallest mountain in the world?"

My guess is the obvious nature of the question would cause you great anxiety. Everest is the highest mountain. It rises 29,000 off the surface of the earth. But while it is the highest, it's not the tallest.

Far from the Himalayas is Mauna Kea in Hawaii. It is nearly a mile taller than Everest and for comparison it is three and a half times taller than Lolo Peak. We often don't consider its immense size because nearly half of it is hidden beneath the waves of the Pacific Ocean. From our perspective, it's big, but not the biggest. But from the perspective of the ocean floor, there's nothing larger.

This shows us the natural limitations we have when we only view the world through human eyes. As humans we can't really stand at the base of it and look up at its peak. We can't climb it in full, and so we lack a sense of its vastness.

What Mauna Kea reveals in terms of geology, the birth of Jesus Christ—what Christians call "the incarnation"—reveals in terms of theology. It gives us eyes to see not only what happens from the surface of Bethlehem to the pinnacle of the cross. But it also reveals a vast distance below the surface.

Every year we celebrate Advent remembering this miracle declared to Joseph regarding his wife Mary, "The virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name, Immanuel (which means, God with us) (Matthew 1:23)." In Jesus, God became man.

It would be an astounding thing for a creature who lived on the ocean floor to ascend all the way to Mauna Kea's summit, but it would also be an impossible thing for those world are incompatible. But when the author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus, our great high priest, "passed through the heavens," he's stating that the impossible became possible.

God spanned the infinite gap between heaven and earth by taking on flesh himself. That the Son of God would die as the God-man for the sins of the world is in fact the most important miracle. But that God would become man is in fact the greatest miracle. J.I. Packer calls the incarnation, "the supreme miracle." But he goes on to say, "it was yet only the first of a series of steps down from the joy and bliss of heaven to the pain and shame of Calvary."

For a fish to come out of the depths to the shore of Hawaii would be a remarkable thing, but in a sense he'd be going to paradise. He's see the sun and the shore of the tropics. But Jesus didn't ascend into paradise, but instead he left paradise to descend into our broken, cold, and hostile world.

In other words, advent, and the birth of Jesus, becomes all the more impressive when we not only understand the world he came into, but also the distance and quality of the world he left. The early pastor Athanasius said something like this, "The effects Jesus accomplished in the incarnation are of

such a kind and a number that if anyone should wish to number them he would be like those who gaze at the expanse of the sea and wish to count its waves."

For the next four weeks, we are going to attempt to count some of those waves. Why is this important? Because if Jesus is only a God, he's going to always seem distant to us. And if Jesus is only a man, then he's always going to seem ultimately powerless to help us. But the incarnation shows us the beauty of and power of Jesus who left Triune glory to be the God-man in order to save us. He became the gospel in our bones.

In short we are going stare at the humble power of Jesus by focusing on his uniquely human experiences in light of his divine nature and person.

Today, as you've already heard read for us, we are going to examine the stunning scandal of Jesus' temptation. Our main point today is this: **Because Jesus never sinned there's hope for those who have.** We are going to look at this in two parts: **The Pain of Jesus' Temptation** and **The Purpose of Jesus' Temptation.**

Our passage today is a few short verses from the gospel of Mark and it's Mark's aptitude for brevity that highlights the tension and trauma of the incarnation. He calls us to focus on two early events in Jesus' life in immediate contrast: his baptism, and his temptation (or testing). This is our first point today: **The Pain of Jesus' Temptation.**

Notice the immediate contrasts of experiences in these few short verses: **Mark 1:9-11** "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'"

What we are seeing here is a sort of divine post-card for what was certainly a homesick soul. Remember, the Son of God existed in all eternity with the Father and the Spirit in glory. He was always and immediately present with them. But when he took on human form in Mary's womb, that relationship moved long distance.

Have you ever had an experience where in a powerful sense you were transported back home—back into your grandparents living room, into your college dorm, or your mother's arms?

I was talking to an American missionary who was serving in a remote and isolated country. After being there for years, someone sent him a bag of coffee from his home town. He said when he brewed it, in this far away land, he was immediately transported home. He could smell his home town coffee shop, he felt the weather in his cup, he said he even was reminded of the pretentious hipster baristas and even that was a gift.

So when Jesus, who at this point had lived in a foreign land, far away from heaven's glory for nearly 30 years at this point, looked up and saw the heavens being torn open, he was transported back in a powerful way.

When Jesus' came up out of the water, the world came alive again as he once knew it in glory. The band was back together. The Spirit descended like a dove, the Father's words probably resounded like the

roar of a waterfall—not merely heard—but felt as he said, “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”

He’s with his earthly cousin John, surrounded by his early disciples, wet and washed in the heat of the dry desert air, together with the nearness of the Spirit and the words of the Father, gazing into heaven. It was, as some might say, “Perfectenshlag.”

For many of us, this might be the life we expect when we become a Christian. Maybe when you come out of the waters of baptism, you expect a similar level of immediate intimacy, unending affirmation, audible confirmation, and the chorus of friends and family. But it’s not long before we realize that soon the real world crowds back in with deadlines, doctor’s appointments and bills to pay. It leaves us wondering what, if any difference, salvation makes.

But it's here where Mark throws the bucket of cold water onto those who would imagine life in that way. **Mark 1:12-13**, “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals and the angels were ministering to him.”

We have lots of jarring experiences in life. Every morning, for most of us, humanity is jarring. Another day has come, though we didn't seem to give it permission. Tasks have been thrust upon us, though we didn't seem to ask for them. And the warm comfort of our bed seems locked in a battle with the cold floor for possession of our very souls.

Jesus' experience here, for any human would have been jarring to the extreme. Note the contrasts: Out of the water, into the wilderness. From the tenderness of a dove, to the threat of wild animals. From relational immanence to immediate loneliness. From the words of the Father's affirmation to the presence of Satan’s temptation.

The heavens became silent, but Satan was not. Now if you’re familiar with the Biblical story you’ll remember that Satan knows a thing or two about tempting important people who find themselves in wild places.

We've seen some remarkable temptations in scripture, but none of them were like this. Adam was tempted, but he was in a perfect garden with a perfect helper. Job was tested, but God set ground rules that Satan had to abide by. But Jesus, had none of these. Satan, unmetered, uninhibited, undistracted set his gaze upon Jesus with the full force of his deceptive and dangerous might. Like Tolkien’s eye of Sauron, the piercing gaze of the enemy’s eye was trained and focused on Jesus.

Temptation is common to all humans. But let’s remember, Jesus was not always human. He existed in Triune bliss. What does sin generally tempt us with but the promise of pleasure, the promise of peace, or the promise of joy? And what is heaven in but the fullness of these things without any stain or sin?

On earth there are many ways we can seek worldly pleasure, and peace and joy, but because of sin many of these are dangerous! As Proverbs tells us, the sweetness of sin is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword (Prov. 5:4). In eternal glory, Jesus would have never had to say no to any pleasure because the greatest and undisputed pleasure was the enjoyment he had in the Trinity itself.

But now, he had the pain of choice. For the first time he had to say no to counterfeit joys. At its core, all of our temptation is promising things that only exist in God. And no one would have known God better, than the one who is God. And therefore no one would have been tempted to enjoy the fruits of that pleasure more than the God who was now man.

Think of it this way: Japanese Wagyu A5 beef is generally considered the most delicious steak in the world. If you're up for it, you can purchase it for nearly \$100 per ounce. That sounds good. But I'm not particularly tempted to do much to get it. Why? Because I've never had it. I'd probably like it, but I'll settle for a cheap cut. But Jesus spent eternity gorging on the Trinity and its beauty. He had tasted its goodness, and because of that if anyone were tempted to take a shortcut to get out of the discount bin, it would have been Jesus.

So why would Jesus do this? Why would he come into a place of such potential strain? Why would he give up the source only to be tempted by the scent? Because we needed a new man. This is our second point this morning. **The Purpose of Jesus' Temptation.**

Adam was tempted as our head in the garden, and he failed. He caved to Satan's temptation though the full array of God's glory crowded around him. In this way, Jesus came to start the Bible over again.

Thomas Aquinas commented on the timing of the incarnation. He said that if God had become man right after the first sin, we would in our pride not be humbled enough, we wouldn't know the glory of what was we left of the value of treasure lost. But he says, **"On the other hand, it would not do to have the incarnation delayed, lest human longing turn to hopelessness and despairing disappointment. Therefore at exactly the right time, in the 'fullness of time,' as St. Paul says (Gal. 4:4), God became man."**

A new man, not in the garden of glory, but in the desert of sin—but one who would redeem those who were enslaved to sin.

We would hardly give up our bed-time Netflix or our morning routine. Jesus gave all of it up, and submitted himself not only to their absence, but to the temptation to retake what was lost through sinful means.

Most of us can probably understand the purpose for Jesus' birth. He came to die for our sins.

But what is the purpose of his temptation? In other words, if Jesus merely needed to die as a sinless human because it was humans who sinned, then what would have stopped Jesus from dying in the womb of Mary? Death, would still be bitter, but the experience for all the parties involved would have perhaps been less. Mary would not have to gain 30 more years of knowledge and love for her son. Jesus would not have to endure the pain of stubbed toes, and this desert scene would have never been a reality.

Or maybe he could have just been born, but as a child caught up in Herod's devious scheme—put to death then as the substitute for our own death. Why did Jesus have to endure this?

He had to endure it because we need more than a substitute for Adam's disobedience, we also needed a substitute for Adam's obedience. We needed someone who not only was free from sin, but someone who also perfectly obeyed.

This is why the author of Hebrews says, **Hebrews 2:10**, "For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering."

Now, here's why it's so important to have a biblical understanding of the incarnation. If you're like me, when you hear that Jesus was made "perfect through suffering," you probably think of a montage of some weak football player being put through a grueling training camp. It's as if Jesus in the flesh needed to suffer the weakness and sin out of him.

But Jesus' suffering was not because he needed the sin to be suffered out of him. Jesus was sinless, he had no sin nature. Adam also was created without a sin nature in the garden, but when he sinned, everyone born of Adam became tainted with the consequence of sin. Paul says in **Romans 5:12** that, "just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." This is what theologians call, "original sin."

That's why I can say with great confidence to any of you in here: you need to be saved. You may not feel like a sinner, but we are born sinners. That's not to say we are born totally evil, but each of us are born totally condemned in our sin.

But Jesus, as the new Adam, was not born of Adam. He was born of the Spirit and of Mary. Jesus in this way was not like us because he was not just man, he was God. Having a divine Father he didn't take on the sin nature and natural sinfulness of those who have an earthly father. However, he was like us in that he possessed all the tools to sin.

This is why the author of Hebrews says this: **Hebrews 4:15**, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

But now I want to really complicate some stuff for us here. Are you ready for this? Even though Jesus was tempted, Jesus could not sin.

Here's why. For Jesus to sin would be for Jesus to violate his own personhood. Remember the person of the eternal Son of God is who took on flesh. The incarnation of Jesus didn't change his desires, it didn't change his will, it didn't change his personality or his person it merely added a human nature to the already existent divine nature. To use a really crude analogy, think of the natures as a glove and the person as the hand. The person, or the hand, would have been all the desires, affections and self-understanding of Jesus. In eternal glory the person had one glove, the divine. But in the incarnation he added another glove over it, the glove of humanity. So now anything Jesus did, he didn't do as a new person—he just acted with an additional nature: divine and human.

So because the eternal Son of God, is God, he is therefore sinless in his person. James says, **James 1:13** "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one."

God cannot be tempted with evil, because evil is not in God. God cannot be God and be evil. In the impossibly hypothetical situation where Jesus did sin, the person of Jesus would have been torn asunder. He would have ceased to be God and God cannot cease to be God.

So what happened in the incarnation? Well you'll notice if you read Luke and Matthew's account of Jesus' temptations you'll notice he was tempted but he was not with evil. He was tempted by food, which itself is not sinful. He was tempted by safety, which in itself is not sinful. And he was tempted by worship, which in itself is not sinful.

To put it another way, Jesus wasn't tempted as we often are by the former experience of sin. Take for instance someone who has looked at pornography whose temptation presents images which are sinful in themselves. Jesus didn't suffer like that, because he had no sinful bank of images or experiences from which to dwell on.

So what was this temptation like, and how can it be of any encouragement to us who aren't perfect and who do have the ability to sin?

Three things we need to bear in mind about this:

First, we must see ***Jesus' Resistance in the flesh***. Even though Jesus did not have a bank of images to draw from, he did have a body and being the very image of God he longed in that body for community and companionship. Even if Jesus was never a glutton, he did have a tongue which tasted the sweetness of honey. Even if Jesus never cursed, he was fully able to stub his toe.

Even though Jesus wasn't tempted by the evil within in him, the evil outside of him (here, Satan) tempted Jesus thoroughly in the flesh. God cannot be tempted in the flesh, because God is spirit. But when the God who is spirit took on flesh, he was tempted by that which up until that point was entirely foreign to him. To use another overly simplistic metaphor, I watched something once in which a man who was formerly a ghost was placed back into a human body and anytime he went to go leave a room he would run into a door because he forgot that he couldn't just walk through them anymore.

For Jesus, obedience was always easy. But now obedience, was hard. It was resisted in real ways by the physicality of his humanity. Jesus knows what it's like to make efforts in faithfulness to God.

Second, we see ***Jesus' Resistance of the divine***. As I studied for this sermon this is what stirred in me the greatest awe of Jesus. Matthew and Mark tell us that the first temptation Satan gives Jesus is to turn stones into bread. The Devil played off what theologians call, "hungeriness." After 40 days of fasting, Jesus was hungry. Yet on a bigger scale, this 40 days of fasting as a man in the desert was not just about Jesus. It was about Jesus as the new Adam, and head of the new Israel.

Adam, was tempted with food in the garden and failed. Israel was tempted in the desert for 40 years and failed. Who could break the mold? Who would pass the test?

In his human nature, Jesus was hungry. In his divine nature, Jesus was incapable of feeling hunger. So Satan, being a good theologian, knew this. He knew that turning these stones into bread was not something that would violate Jesus' divinity. Jesus would not have been overtly sinful to do this.

But why then did Satan seek to tempt him in this way? He did it because he was trying to get Jesus to act not in accordance with his human nature, but only in accordance with the divine. In essence, he was saying to Jesus, "This is hard isn't it? Your tummy is rumbling isn't it? You have the ability to do something

about it don't you? Why not? Why suffer like this? Why not a little snack? You are the Son of God aren't you?"

Jesus could have in that moment chosen to act only in relationship to his divine nature. He could have suspended his humanity, and relieved by his own will all of his human hunger and it would have had no consequence on his person. He freely chose to take on flesh, could he not freely choose to relieve himself from the burden of the flesh?

But if he did this, if he chose to "sub-out" so to speak, to resist the temptation of the Devil by acting only in accord with his divine nature he would have been no good to us. We didn't need a God to obey. We needed a man to obey. Jesus chose to obey, to endure, and to suffer temptation in his humanity because it was humanity, not God who needed to defeat sin.

Jesus was tempted, and Jesus endured, because every waking moment, of every earthy morning, and every earthy step he had us on his mind. He chose to obey not to vindicate himself, but to vindicate us. He could have taken the easy route, he could have said no to it all and chosen to flee temptation in order to no longer suffer the weight of humanity--but he chose to do it because he loved us.

This is what leads Paul to say this in **Philippians 2:4-8**, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Have this in mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

The thing which should shock us most about Jesus is not the he never sinned like we did, but the he chose to obey like we didn't. On the cross Jesus suffered substitutionally for your sins, but in his life he lived substitutionally for your obedience.

And this weight never left him. There were no breaks. Certainly Satan left him after this scene, but the responsibility to obey as a human never did.

This is where we see **Jesus' Resistance to the End**. Paul tells us that his obedience took him to the cross, and it was only on the cross where Jesus' temptation ultimately ended.

You see, Jesus might not recall what it felt like to be drunk, but Jesus is the only one who knows what it feels like to be tempted to the end. He is the only human to have ever resisted temptation in full.

C.S. Lewis pointed out in his day a false idea you might have in our own. It's a goody-two-shoes understanding of Jesus: "Well yeah, he's a good guy, therefore he wasn't tempted like we were." But he goes on to point out that it's only those who are truly "good" who actually know the weight of temptation.

He says you may go a day or a week without giving into temptation, but try six weeks, try six months. He says at that point, **"No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good...Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by laying down. A man who gives into temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later...We never find out the strength of the evil impulse**

inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because he was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means."

In other words, the author of Hebrews was not wrong, he was tempted in every way like us. But it's also true that Jesus was tempted far more than any of us. If we look at the nature of the incarnation and of Jesus' willing, intentional, and continual efforts to obey in our place we will find our temptations far too small a comparison for what Jesus did in our place.

He obeyed perfectly, and he felt every weight of it. He felt every burden of humanity. In his flesh, in his heart, and in his mind. And he endured as the God-Man. Not as God to whom obedience is due, but the God who obeyed for me and you.

And how did he do it? By the help of the Spirit. Let us not forget it was the Spirit who sent him there, alone and among the wild animals. But was it not also the Spirit that cared for him there? Moreover even though the Father's voice was absent, his care was not, the angels served Jesus.

Even in the midst of temptation when we find ourselves alone, we are never alone!

But where are my angels? You might say? It seems the dove is gone, the desert is near, the voice is silent, and the tempter is loud.

But notice what the author of Hebrews says of Jesus: **Hebrews 2:14-18**.

Brothers and sisters, because of all that Jesus endured. Because he endured things that no God should ever endure. Because he endured and he endured to the end. Because he endured when and where you never could. We are ministered to by someone greater than an angel in the spirit, we are ministered to by our brother, our savior, our Jesus in the flesh.

So what do we do with this?

First, we need to realize we need him more than we know. We need Jesus not only because we sinned, but also because we didn't obey. You need a new man, and it doesn't come from a New Year, it comes in the gift of Jesus Christ.

Second, we see his is worthy of more worship than we can imagine. Look up the slope of glory. See how much he gave up, how much he endured, and know he did it so that you might find your pleasure and your peace in him. What sin tempts us with, worship satisfies us with. So let us conclude today by worshipping this Jesus.