

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

**Luke 4:1–13**

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Luke 4:1–13 (NIV)

“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.”

Today’s message is called “A Survivor’s Guide to Temptation.” Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:21 that “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps.” Therefore, when we read Scriptures like today, where we have the temptation of the Lord, we must understand that it’s not simply a story about Him. It is a story about us as well. For all of us face temptations. And the Lord is showing us, through His own example, leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps; showing by His example how to survive temptation.

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

Speaking of the fact that all of us do face temptation, I like the little phrase that says, “Youth are tempted by the world’s pleasures and older people are tempted by the world’s treasures.” There’s some truth to that.

As I walk through this Scripture with you this morning, I’d like for you to take a moment and focus upon an area where temptation is especially strong in your life. I think you’ll get lot more out of this message if—rather than simply generalizing temptation in terms of something very broad and generalized—you will focus, instead, upon the specific temptation or two or three temptations that most plague you, and let this message speak to your heart about surviving and overcoming those areas of temptation.

Seven lessons from this temptation.

#### **I. Don’t be surprised if temptation comes to you following a spiritual high.**

Jesus had had a spiritual high at His baptism. He was baptized, the Spirit of God had descended in bodily form upon Him, and a voice spoke from heaven said, “You are My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” I don’t think you could be any more high than that. Yet, immediately following that, the Scriptures say that the Spirit led Him into the wilderness. Luke and Matthew place an emphasis on being led, and Mark uses a more strong verb and simply says, “The Spirit drove Him into the wilderness.” It was part of the Spirit’s plan to descend upon Him at His baptism and it was equally the Spirit’s plan that He should be thrust into the wilderness to be tested. A low time in His life would follow an exceedingly high time.

I’m so glad for this Scripture, for it helped me understand something very dynamic that happens to us after we’ve had a real spiritual encounter with the Lord. Often, those spiritual encounters are followed the next day or the next week or the next month by a battle that seems the strongest that we have ever faced.

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

I recall, as a college student, going up to Pinecrest camp and having a great spiritual retreat.

Actually, this was when I was in seminary. I would come down from those retreats and think that I had finally arrived at the point in my life of such spiritual victory and attainment that, not only would I never sin again, I would never be tempted again. Then to find out, upon returning from that mountaintop, that probably the test and the temptation was stronger than it had ever been prior to my having that new spiritual experience with the Lord.

It is the enemy's function to take the seed that has been sown and attempt to extinguish it. Like the birds eat the seeds sown along the path, the devil can be expected to actively oppose spiritual growth and progress. So if there's no active temptation in your life, if there's no active struggle in your life, I would say there may be a question as to whether or not there's any active spiritual growth. For the great spiritual battles are inevitably fought by the people who are attempting to make great progress in the Lord. So don't be surprised at the fiery trial when you have had spiritual breakthroughs, even for some of you who have just recently come to faith in Jesus Christ. You have perhaps been tempted and tested in areas of finance, in areas of assuming old habit patterns, in areas of depression, and you say, "I thought conversion was going to take care of all those things." After the Lord's baptism came His temptation. Don't be surprised that spiritual lows follow spiritual highs.

### **II. The second lesson flowing out of the temptation of Jesus: Be prepared for the worst temptations to hit you when you seem to have the least resistance.**

The devil comes, talking to Jesus about food when He had been without food for forty days. It's interesting, again, to compare the Gospels among themselves. Luke tells us that Jesus was tested all forty days. Matthew's Gospel tells us that the devil came to Jesus at the end of the temptation. Both are true. Jesus was hungry all forty days. That, in itself, was a form of temptation and we

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

will see why it was for Him. But specifically, at the conclusion of the temptation, when He was most vulnerable, when it was either “eat now or die,” at that moment, the devil materializes before Him in a stronger concentration of temptation and testing that had preceded during those forty days of being without food in the wilderness.

This is the case in our own life. When are you most subject to the temptation of depression? It's when you're at your lowest, when you're most tired or when you're most discouraged and when the last thing you need is one more bit of bad news. That's when the test comes.

When is it that you're most subject to sexual temptation? It is when you feel hurt. It is when you feel so very alone within. It is when you have gotten over-involved with someone else. It is when you're reaching out for understanding and for joy. It is when you are the lowest, often, when you're most tempted.

When are you the most subject to dishonesty? It's when things really get tight. It's the student who really hasn't studied that week, that is now taking the exam and sitting next to the A student who knows all the answers. It's one of those simple multiple choice tests in which you're guessing and the person next to you is knowing. What a great opportunity to cheat when you're at your lowest, because you're not ready.

When are you most tempted to pad expenses on your employees' account? It is when you're running the lowest in your own finances.

When do you feel most tempted to strike out with harsh words and harsh actions and harsh moods? It is when you have been hurt, when you have been neglected, when you have become angry. Temptation strikes us at low levels.

Sometimes I have what I call the “Elijah Syndrome.” It sometimes will hit me on a Sunday night, after a full day of ministry on Sunday; there will come this rush of self-doubt and inadequacy

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

and unworthiness. It's because I'm spiritually and physically and mentally spent. That is the moment at which the devil can have a field day on my thought life. It's coming at that moment of low resistance. So we need to be aware of that. That's the pattern with Jesus.

### **III. A third lesson in the survivor's guide to temptation is to realize that temptation will hit you where your level of strength is.**

Jesus' temptation was not at my level of strength. His is on an entirely different level. I wish the devil would materialize for me and say, "George Wood, turn these stones into bread." It would not be a temptation for me at all because, even if I tried as hard as I could, I would have no luck at all. The stones would remain stones. I wouldn't even have the good fortune of getting some leaven in the rock. It's just not my ability, not my level of spiritual strength to turn rocks into bread. So it's a meaningless temptation for me.

But for Jesus, the temptation came to Him at His level of strength, and therefore, it is a very meaningful temptation. All of us have our levels of vulnerability and our levels of strength. You could tempt me all day long with a million dollars. Set it out here—a million dollars in cold cash—and tell me, "Watch that while I'm gone." And I would watch it...if you weren't gone too long. I would not be tempted at all; because money is not an area of temptation for me. An area of temptation for me is to doubt my worth. And if you could get me to doubt my worth, then you've got me.

David the king had no weaknesses in his righteous dealings with his employees. He was a marvelous person working with the people that were around him. But he was vulnerable to sexual temptation and that is where the temptation came. The level of strength for him, where he was strong and weak, was in this arena.

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

When the Lord gets you to resist in one area, the devil will no longer test you in that area. Over a period of time, he will move away from that and get you in another area. So if your area of temptation, your level of strength right now, is such that the devil is not testing you in that area, it is because you have successfully resisted him and he's moving on, as he did with the Lord.

When he saw that he could not get Him at the level of strength—the rocks and bread—he comes next to the level of “bow down and worship me.” When that doesn't succeed, he then wants Jesus to throw Himself down. He keeps coming until he finds a level in which we will cave in.

#### **IV. There always seem to be justifiable reasons for yielding to temptation.**

In fact, the devil gives Jesus some justifiable reasons for temptation when he quotes, in the third temptation found in Luke, Psalm 91:11–12, “He will give His angels charge concerning you, to guard you carefully.” “If You want an excuse, Jesus, to sin by mistrusting God, then here it is: Psalm 91:11–12.” Whenever we sin, the human tendency, like Adam, is to find some scapegoat, to find some justifiable reason.

I like the little story of the wife who brought home a very expensive dress. “Why did you buy that dress?” Her husband asked her. “You know that we can't afford it. Besides, you put it on our charge card.” She said to her husband, “The devil made me do it. I was trying it on in the store and the devil said to me, ‘That dress just looks gorgeous on you.’” And the husband said to her, “Why didn't you say to the devil, ‘Get thee behind me.’” She said, “I did. But he said the dress looked great from behind also.”

We have these wonderful ways of justifying, giving in to temptation.

I think a more appropriate response to temptation, when we fail, is to take responsibility for it.

Our only hope for ever overcoming the temptation is to admit that we also bear the responsibility for making the decision. We can always cop out by saying, “If you'd had the kind of family that

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

I came from, you would be weak in that area too.” I suppose it’s all right in a certain kind of way, to lay some of the responsibility for who we are upon our background. But I think that it’s never sufficient to let the responsibility stop there. If we are going to say, “I did that because that’s what happened to me as a kid growing up. I had those patterns put into me,” we need to say one additional phrase beyond that. Simply, “Those patterns were put into me. But now I take responsibility for them.” It is when we begin to take responsibility, rather than blaming other people or events or things, that we begin to find a cure for our life.

Jesus did not come up with any justifiable reason to give in to the temptation. He resisted it. He took responsibility.

### **V. Each temptation is rooted upon an attack of God’s authority on our life.**

All temptation to sin is therefore a temptation to, in some way, step outside of God’s will, to step outside of His Word, to look at His Word, and look at the requirements in our life, and feel like the requirements of His Word are too stiff and unbending and unyielding. “If God only knew what I were going through, He would see it my way as well.” Temptation is stepping out of God’s will. It involves a denial of His Word or a distortion of His Word.

Both of these are present in the temptation of Jesus. The devil starts off by trying to get Jesus to deny God’s Word to Him, by saying to Him, “If You are the Son of God...” That question had already been settled at the baptism, when the voice from heaven said, “You are My beloved Son.” The devil’s purpose in temptation is to cause us to doubt the Word which God had spoken. All the way back to Eden, it was that way. “Has God said?” If the devil is not successful in causing us to doubt God’s Word, He will attempt to distort it, as He does with Jesus in the use of Psalm 91:11–12, by taking some fraction of the Word, stripping it away from the entirety of God’s Word and using that for an excuse for us to do wrong.

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

Resisting temptation involves letting God's authority stand in our life, even though, to us, we do not see how in the world we can obey God and remain rational, remain functioning. It is, of course, the devil's idea to get us to feel that, if we obey God, we can't make it. We won't succeed. Life will really cave in.

Here is where we're tested by what the authority in our life is. Which leads us to the sixth lesson out of the temptation.

#### **VI. The purpose of temptation is to break our trust in God.**

That was where the temptations of Jesus were all heading. The enemy was trying to get Jesus to break His trust in God. In a very real sense, the temptations were all related to the mission of Jesus to go to the cross.

**A.** The first temptation, to turn stones into bread, was to say to Jesus, "Do a miracle for Yourself." That was the precise temptation He would face later, when His accusers would say to Him when He hung on the cross, "Save Yourself and come down. Do something for Yourself." But Jesus, having done miracles for others, determined to never do a miracle for Himself; but to live a human life in total dependence upon the Father, in total trust. To do something for Himself, to use His miraculous powers for Himself, would be to break that trust that the Father would take care of Him and the Father would sustain Him.

**B.** The temptation that Jesus faced when the devil lifted Him upon a high place to show Him all the kingdoms of the world is a temptation, again, to avoid the cross, to break trust in the Father and go for an external kingdom rather than the spiritual kingdom that the Father would bring through changes in the inner life.

**C.** The third temptation in Luke, where the devil takes Him to a high place in the temple, is that He again would break His trust in the Father by calling people to relationship with God based

## A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION

### Luke 4:1–13

upon spectacular signs rather than upon the volition, the will, that comes through faith. This is what the Pharisees would later want Him to do. “Do some signs in the heavens to prove to us that you are the Messiah. How will Your kingdom come?” Jesus says, “It’s going to come by My absolute reliance upon the Father.”

Just as kind of an aside, you’ll notice that the order of the temptations in Luke and in Matthew differs. The second and third temptations are reversed in Luke as compared to Matthew. The reason for that is simply that Matthew is following a chronological order. It’s very clear that he’s following a chronological order, because he used words like “afterward” and “then.” But Luke is simply taking the temptation as a whole and presenting them topically and does not use connectives like “afterward” and “then” but simply uses a word like “and.” The temptations, occurring all very close together, relate to the common denominator: Will He trust in the Father? We say this about the temptations that we face in our life. “Lord, at the bedrock bottom of my life, do I trust You to meet my deepest needs? Do I trust You to meet my financial needs? Do I trust You to meet my needs for companionship? Do I trust You to allow me to find the right person to be married to if I am to be married? Do I trust You with the definition of my own self worth? Do I trust You with my sexuality? Do I trust You to give me meaningful activity?”

Temptation is a shortcut that always provides an alternative to trust in God. Temptation promises that, if you’ll do it other than God’s way, you’ll get quick results. Trust places you in dependence upon the Father. It may take longer, but the results will be far more satisfying.

John Claypool, a gifted preacher in our time, tells the story of two brothers in one of his books called *The Preaching Event*. The two brothers were identical twins. When their father died, they inherited his store. These brothers had such a friendship with one another that, over a period of time, they decided to not marry but to rather simply run their business together and live their

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

lives as close brothers, close friends. They embarked upon managing their father's store with great joy. One day, a customer came into that store and bought a small item of merchandise, paid a dollar for it. One twin brother laid the dollar on the register and walked the customer to the door. When he returned to the cash register the dollar was missing. So he said to his brother, "Did you put the dollar bill that I left here in the cash register?" His twin brother said, "No, I didn't. I didn't see a dollar bill." A few hours went by and the twin brother said, "Surely, you must have taken the dollar bill and put it somewhere, or taken it, because it's not here. And I know it was here." The brother became very offended that his brother would doubt his word. Angry words ensued between them. A seed of distrust was planted so that it was only a matter of a few short weeks and they were no longer talking to one another in distrust over what happened to this dollar bill. The distrust became so severe, that finally they placed a wall down the center of their store and formed two separate stores. For the next twenty years, John Claypool says, they did not talk to one another. One day, a car pulled up outside the store and a man walked in to one of the sides. He said to the brother that was there, "Has this store been here for awhile?" Yes, he said. This store has been here for over thirty years. "Well," the man said, "I have a confession to make. Twenty years ago, I came through this town. I was lonely. I was cold. I was homeless. I had gone for some days without food. I was riding a boxcar. I came up in the alley behind this store, and when I looked in the open door, I saw a dollar laying on the cash register. I was brought up in a Christian home and we were taught never to steal, but that dollar there was a temptation for me, and I came in and took the dollar. As I was driving through town today and saw this store in this place, I was reminded of that in my life and I have come to apologize and ask your forgiveness." He couldn't understand why this brother was weeping as he told this story. The brother said, "Would you come to the other side of the store and tell my twin brother

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

that same story.” As the man repeated the story, the twin began to weep as well. Twenty years, a separation had occurred because there was distrust.

Our basic sin against God is mistrust. The devil hints that God is withholding something from us. And he suggests ways that we can take care of ourselves and get what's due us. In this temptation that Jesus faces here, He is wrestling with this age old issue: will I trust God or will I not? When we choose not to trust Him, hurt is introduced into our relationship, sorrow, pain and anxiety.

Responding to temptation is the realization that the devil is trying to shake our trust. Jesus shows us that a clean-cut obedience to God forces the devil to back off. When the devil tried to get Jesus to bow down and worship him and he would give Him all the kingdoms of time, I'm convinced that, if Jesus had done that, the devil would have gone back on his deal. Because, while you can always trust God and His promises for your life, you can never trust the enemy. What he promises is always the chimera, that fantasy oasis that's out for the crazy person that's been lost in the desert and heat without water. It is chimera. It will not exist. It's a fantasy. He tries to get us to shake our trust in God and put our trust in what he is offering. And there is nothing there if we bite.

But one of the things about temptation—we think, when we're going through—is that, if we don't give in, it will never stop. So we reach a point in the temptation in which we say, “The temptation is so strong, I've got to give in to it. I have no alternative. I can't take this kind of pressure.” But there comes that moment in temptation in which—if you'll resist the pressure and do what Jesus did and stand upon God's authority and God's Word and say to the devil, “Get thee behind me, Satan” – he leaves. That's one of the secrets about temptation that I think is one of the great unknowns among many Christians. The devil can be resisted. If you'll resist him

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

when you're the lowest and the weakest and feel like you can't hang on another minute, he will leave. He will leave. He will come back at a more opportune season, as he did with Jesus, but there comes a moment when he will leave. Because the Lord promises us that we will never be tested beyond that which we can bear. It's a real compliment to you if you're being tested real heavily in an area. The Lord knows, even if you don't agree, that you have the strength to deal with it or you wouldn't be tested with it. So God has great confidence in you. You're being tested in an area of your strength. And He'll help you overcome. Resist the devil and He will flee from you.

### **VII. We must always keep God's past and God's future in mind as we face the present moment of temptation.**

God's past is what He has done for us prior to our moment of testing. Jesus knew what God the Father meant to Him, and who He was in God. And, in the midst of temptation, He did not forget who He was or what He was about. But Jesus knew, also, that ahead of Him, following the temptation, was His public ministry, and He looked forward to that.

It's so much easier to resist temptation when you have something to look forward to. Whenever you face a temptation, it seems like this is the end and there's nothing beyond this anyway: "I don't have any hope anyway; it's very difficult to resist that temptation." But Jesus knew that, upon the successful completion of this temptation, He would launch His public ministry and get done what God had called Him into the world to do. He faced the future and He survived the temptation because His eyes were fixed, not only on the past, but on what was coming.

The Scriptures keep breaking through to our present world by reminding us of God's great and exceeding promises that He has for us. And reminding us that the plans that He has for us are not for evil but for good, to give us a purpose and a hope. In our present moment of temptation, we

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

need to acknowledge what God has done for us already and what He has yet in mind. There is everything to live for. Jesus would not jeopardize the future of His great adventure by breaking trust in God. We cannot either.

Temptation and testing are a necessary part of life. As a younger Christian, I lived with the illusion that there would come a day in my own life when I would no longer be tested or tempted. If I could just get holy enough, if I could just pray long enough, if I could just read my Bible more, if I would just spend more time at the altar, if I would just witness more, if I would just give more, if I would attend enough revival meetings, if I would make enough consecrations, I would come to that wonderful moment of breakthrough in life where, not only would I never sin again, but I would never be tempted again. I always thought that pastors were those kinds of perfect people. I chuckle when people assume that I'm never tempted or tested. Live with me for twenty-four hours. My wife will tell you. We're all tempted and tested. And I think, as we grow spiritually, probably the tests become far more subtle and, if the principle of "to him who has more will be given" is valid, then it simply means that, as you grow in the Lord, your tests and your temptations are on a stronger level than they were when you started following Christ; although they may perceptively change. I think, for the person who is undergoing spiritual maturity, the temptations increasingly take on more pure, spiritual dimensions.

I wanted, for this great time, to come where there would be no more temptations, no more tests. But it's through temptations and tests that we're being made strong in life. I think we need to discern that, from the enemy's point of view, the temptation is to cause us to fall. But from God's point of view, the temptation is allowed to cause us to realize our strengths. Jesus comes out of the wilderness in strength and in power. Likewise, when we emerge victorious through

## A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION

### Luke 4:1–13

temptation, we realize that an area of strength has been gained in our life and that area has been sealed off and made exceedingly strong.

This week in the *Register* they ran the column of everyday little David Rothenberg, the little boy who was burned by the fire set by his father. On Wednesday, as part of the story told by his mother, they related the account of the physical therapist at the burn unit. She was recalling the first moment she met the therapist. He came into the room where her little severely burned David lay, with lips and hands and arms and face all pushed out of shape and unrecognizable. He said to her, as he strode into the room, “I’m sorry. I know what I’m going to do is hurting David, but we have no choice.” As he began to take hold of little David’s arms and stretch them, and David cried out in pain, she remonstrated with him and tried to get him evicted from the room so he would leave her little hurting David alone. But he resisted her attempts and took her aside and explained to her, “Your son’s body will begin to contract upon itself. His hands will claw. His arms will bend in upon themselves. His body will automatically contract into the fetal position. If we don’t stop that contracting, he will be forever bent. His arms and his legs will be useless. His hands will dangle at his side.” The therapy of stretching was necessary so he wouldn’t revert to that fetal position. And it hurt to go through that stretching. It hurts when we go through spiritual strengthening. But it’s the only way God knows, and it’s the only way I know, that we become strong—to be tested. The more we are tested, the stronger we become.

Basketball teams, when they go out to play a game with someone, are not entering that game in order to lose. It’s their opponent’s goal to make them lose. But they’re entering that game to prove at what level of strength they are.

So it is with temptation. When we enter temptation, it’s the enemy’s purpose to cause us to lose. It’s God’s purpose to cause us to win. The more we win, the stronger opponents we’ll face. If

## **A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO TEMPTATION**

### **Luke 4:1–13**

you don't move incrementally and stretch yourself, you never get ready for the greater ways and the greater tests and the greater strengths. It's ok to yell, "ouch!" when you're being tested, when you're being tempted, when you're being pushed around. It's not pleasant. You don't like it all. Nobody likes it. But it's a way of emerging in your life with power and with strength.

Don't be surprised that temptation comes to you following a spiritual high. Be prepared for the worst temptations to hit you when you have the least resistance. Temptation will come to you at your level of strength. There are always justifiable reasons for yielding to temptation.

Temptation is rooted in an attack on God's authority in our life. The purpose of temptation is to break our trust in God. But keep God's past and God's future in mind as you face the present moment of temptation.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Father, now we focus in on that specific area of temptation that we singled out at the beginning of this message; the area where the enemy appears to us and causes us the most vexation and problems. We bring that area to You. We ask, Lord, that when our obedience to You still comes short, because our willpower does not seem strong enough, that You will give us the power that is above the power of our will, the power of the Spirit, to break the tempter's power. And Lord, that through the temptation that each of us face, our trust in You will emerge strong and vibrant. Help us, Lord, to survive the temptation. And more than that, help us to overcome. For greater are You who is in us than he who is in the world. I can do all things through You who strengthens me. Let no one think that the temptation they face is greater than Your resources to challenge and to help. We ask this, Lord, in Your name. Amen.