Ashes to Fire

With Jesus in the Desert

March 12/13, 2011, First Sunday in Lent
Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)
Ashes to Fire: With Jesus in the Desert
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Background Notes
Key Scripture Texts: Matthew 4:1-11; Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19

Introduction to Lent
Throughout most of its history, the Christian church has looked at the story of Jesus as an annual and repeatable experience. Christians, in some communions, follow something called the liturgical calendar which cycles through the great events in the life of Jesus and the Church. Most recently we celebrated Advent and Christmas — two distinct dimensions to the arrival of Jesus in the world as a human being. In addition to these are Epiphany, Lent and Pentecost. When we are walking through these periods of the Christian calendar, we deal with something called "sacred time" because it places emphasis on the great deeds of God convergent on Jesus Christ. But then, connecting these sacred occasions are spans known as "ordinary time" when we live out the meaning and rest in the power of Christ's special achievements for our salvation. Ordinary time reminds us that we have work to do, relying on the grace of God to do it. Even though it's not Advent or Lent, we still must live out the life of the Spirit, making progress in our world on behalf of God's coming kingdom. The "Our Father" seeks God's "will done on earth as in heaven," and so the heavenly experiences of the great feasts — Lent being one of them — must find their way into the earthly life of the everyday world.

The liturgical calendar is not a piece of legalistic structure which binds us against our wills to follow a certain path through time. Instead, celebrating the great feasts liberates us from the bondage to ordinary time, rejuvenating our spiritual lives and focusing our attention on "heavenly things" so that we can be truly of "earthly good." For us, such special times of holy remembrance concentrate our minds and hearts on the deeper meaning of Jesus Christ. Having just come through the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle, we reflected on the incarnation of Jesus as a real human being, "born of the Virgin Mary." Various aspects of his Advent and its meaning to us come under the spotlight and receive close attention. Ending this sequence of sacred time is Epiphany (January 6) which welcomes the Magi who arrive in Bethlehem guided by the light of the star, and with their coming we see a foreshadowing of God's future calling the Gentiles to become part of His people.

In some senses, Epiphany ("the showing, making known, revealing") casts its light forward across ordinary time from January 7th until the traditional Ash Wednesday when the Lent begins. During this period we are called upon to live "in light of" the incarnate Jesus, whose "radiant beams" mark the "dawn of redeeming grace."

The day is now observed as a time of focusing on the mission of the church in reaching others by "showing" Jesus as the Savior of all people. It is also a time of focusing on Christian brotherhood and fellowship, especially in healing the divisions of prejudice and bigotry that we all too often create between God’s children.

With the arrival of Ash Wednesday (March 9, 2011, this year), we return to the earthly ministry of Jesus which climaxes with his death and resurrection, the epitome of the Gospel.

…the seventh Wednesday before Easter Sunday, is the first day of the Season of Lent. Its name comes from the ancient practice of placing ashes on worshippers’ heads or foreheads as a sign of humility before God, a symbol of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings into the world. It not only prefigures the mourning at the death

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1 The series title and the weekly topics for these Background Notes are based on the Lenten-Pentecost devotional guide, Ashes to Fire, Edited by Merritt J. Nielson (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2010). Readers are encouraged to secure a copy of that excellent guide, and use it in conjunction with the Lenten-Pentecost emphasis.

of Jesus, but also places the worshipper in a position to realize the consequences of sin. Ash Wednesday is a somber day of reflection on what needs to change in our lives if we are to be fully Christian.

In the early church, ashes were not offered to everyone but were only used to mark the forehead of worshippers who had made public confession of sin and sought to be restored to the fellowship of the community at the Easter celebration. However, over the years others began to show their humility and identification with the penitents by asking that they, too, be marked as sinners. Finally, the imposition of ashes was extended to the whole congregation in services similar to those that are now observed in many Christian churches on Ash Wednesday. Ashes became symbolic of that attitude of penitence reflected in the Lord’s prayer: “forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (Luke 11:4, NRSV).3

This weekend marks the first Sunday in Lent,4 the beginning of a journey with the earthly Jesus on his way to fulfill his Father’s will at the cross — and beyond.

The season of Lent has not been well observed in much of evangelical Christianity, largely because it was associated with "high church" liturgical worship that some churches were eager to reject. However, much of the background of evangelical Christianity, for example the heritage of John Wesley, was very "high church." Many of the churches that had originally rejected more formal and deliberate liturgy are now recovering aspects of a larger Christian tradition as a means to refocus on spirituality in a culture that is increasingly secular.

Originating in the fourth century of the church, the season of Lent spans 40 weekdays beginning on Ash Wednesday and climaxing during Holy Week with Holy Thursday (Maundy Thursday), Good Friday, and concluding Saturday before Easter. Originally, Lent was the time of preparation for those who were to be baptized, a time of concentrated study and prayer before their baptism at the Easter Vigil, the celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord early on Easter Sunday. But since these new members were to be received into a living community of Faith, the entire community was called to preparation. Also, this was the time when those who had been separated from the Church would prepare to rejoin the community.

Today, Lent is marked by a time of prayer and preparation to celebrate Easter. Since Sundays celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, the six Sundays that occur during Lent are not counted as part of the 40 days of Lent, and are referred to as the Sundays in Lent. The number 40 is connected with many biblical events, but especially with the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for His ministry by facing the temptations that could lead him to abandon his mission and calling. Christians today use this period of time for introspection, self examination, and repentance. This season of the year is equal only to the Season of Advent in importance in the Christian year, and is part of the second major grouping of Christian festivals and sacred time that includes Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost.

Lent has traditionally been marked by penitential prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Some churches today still observe a rigid schedule of fasting on certain days during Lent, especially the giving up of meat, alcohol, sweets, and other types of food. Other traditions do not place as great an emphasis on fasting, but focus on charitable deeds, especially helping those in physical need with food and clothing, or simply the giving of money to charities. Most Christian churches that observe Lent at all focus on it as a time of prayer, especially penance, repenting for failures and sin as a way to focus on the need for God’s grace. It is really a preparation to celebrate God’s marvelous redemption at Easter, and the resurrected life that we live, and hope for, as Christians.5

Through Lent, therefore, we re-live genuine history — the history of Jesus of Nazareth, the One 1) expected by the Hebrew Scriptures; 2) revealed as the Son of God; 3) incarnate as Son of Man; 4) teacher of God’s subversive wisdom; 5) expression of redefined love; 6) servant King; 7) resurrected in a transformed humanity. Each week we will explore one of these crucial dimensions of Jesus. The Jesus in whom we place supreme confidence to bring us into God's new world is the same Jesus who left his indelible mark on the landscape of

3 Ibid.
4 The word “Lent” comes from a Teutonic word meaning “to lengthen” and refers to the lengthening periods of light as spring arrives and winter ends. The spiritual analogy ought to be obvious, especially as we approach the resurrection when Lent ends and Easter begins.
5 Ibid.
first century Israel, and whose words and deeds echo still in the evidence behind. Scripture, history, and the associated sciences used to study them do not stutter in making their claim on our minds and hearts.

**Introduction to this Week’s Study**

On the Lenten-Easter-Pentecost journey, we travel *with Jesus* through a series of important events. We are, at the same time, travelling with Israel, the ancient people of God. Quite intentionally, the Gospel writers, like Matthew, frame the story of Jesus with the Israel story. It is not surprising, then, to find ourselves with Jesus in the wilderness — in the desert. Fresh from Egyptian slavery, set free by the Exodus events, Israel immediately found themselves living in a place of apparent scarcity, where food and water failed to match even the meager supply of sustenance in a slave’s household. Cast on the forces of a stingy Nature, the people of God learned the rigors of putting their faith in “the God who provides.” At the same time, living under such deprivation, Israel also succumbed to innumerable temptations. Through hardships, the people murmured to Moses, complained that God had abandoned them, and showed a willingness to give up their freedom for the food of Egypt — albeit as slaves.

Israel emerged from the waters of the Red Sea. Jesus emerged from the waters of baptism in the Jordan River, and then found himself in the desert — the wilderness — as if to reverse the journey of ancient Israel, re-tracing their steps in hope that unlike them, he would get it right this time. This planned parallelism makes sense in light of Jesus’ role to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15) — that is, to identify fully with the sinful people of God so that he might eventually deliver them by his own death on the cross. Whereas, the Passover lamb began the journey of Israel, in the case of Jesus, he would become the Lamb of God at the end. His descent from heaven to earth was a departure from the ultimate land of promise in order to live the wilderness life on earth.

What will Jesus find in the wilderness? Here we will meet the archenemy of God, the quintessential rebel within the creation. Jesus was entering occupied space on a mission to end the illegitimate rule of Satan and effect regime change. He must demonstrate through his resistance to the tempter’s stratagems that the coming kingdom of God is more powerful and more redemptive than Satan’s rule of darkness. Jesus does battle with the prince of this world in order to end his stranglehold on God’s good creation.

Our reading from Genesis 2 and 3, reminds us that the bondage of humanity to mere creatureliness is a very old story. Placed in the garden by God’s design, human beings were given a basic set of instructions for navigating their choices. Faced with a mere creature — a serpent no less — they utterly failed to heed the command of God and allowed their decision to be shaped by appeals to desire, to pleasure, and to self-interest. Where humanity failed, Jesus would triumph.

In Psalm 32 we hear the psalmist confessing his sin, and showing gratitude that God forgives him. He considers the devastating effects of sin on human nature, especially when it is not dealt with. Showing concern for his fellow travelers on the human journey, he also offers counsel to those who have not yet found relief.

With his flair for theological argument, Paul tells the story of the two human beings in Romans 5: the one man Adam and the one man Jesus Christ — the new Adam. We are being told that God’s response to the human failure is the formation of a new humanity, victorious over sin and full of hope.

Taken together, these four passages form the basis for the beginning of our Lenten journey. The opening narrative is filled with conflict which ends with a provisional victory. We begin there.

**Led By the Spirit into the Desert (Matthew 4:1-11)**

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their
hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”  7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'  8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.  9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" 11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

"Led up" by the Spirit
When Matthew tells us that Jesus "went up" (Greek: anēchthē) into the wilderness, he is accurately reflecting the geography. The Jordan River, near the point where John was likely baptizing, is roughly 1250 feet below sea level, an elevation nearly as low as the Dead Sea to the south (approx -1300 feet). Almost any wilderness region around this location would have taken Jesus "up" at least 300 feet or more. The traditional view has Jesus traveling across the Jordan to the west. Mount Quarantal, northwest of Jericho, is the traditional site of this event. The summit of the Mount of Temptation, rises to a height of 1000 feet above sea level and commands a view of the Jordan Valley. The road, located at the base of this mountain, connects Jericho with Jerusalem and is called "the valley of the shadow of death."

The role of the Spirit becomes crucial in the life of Jesus, starting with the temptation. We witnessed the dramatic descent of the Spirit at his baptism. John the Baptist made a point of telling his audience that God previously predicted that the One on whom the Spirit came and remained would be the Messiah. While the voice from heaven announced Jesus as "my beloved Son…," the divinity of Jesus in no way diminished Jesus' dependence on the Holy Spirit. Remember, Jesus was re-enacting not only Israel's story, but also that of the human race, starting with Adam and Eve. His humanity required the Spirit to withstand the temptations about to be flung against him by "the devil." Through his reliance on the Spirit, Jesus was showing us how a life properly surrendered to God ought to be lived. The Spirit would one day become the portion of every Christ follower.

Tempted by the Devil
Matthew’s account chooses the word diabolos, "devil," to describe the adversary Jesus faced in the wilderness. The nature of the devil is to oppose and resist the fresh advance of God's kingdom. He is elsewhere called the "accuser of the brothers" (Revelation 12:10), indicating his role as "fault-finder" and slanderer. Throughout the New Testament we learn the following things about diabolos:

1. He sows "weeds" in the kingdom which grow alongside good seed until the harvest (Matthew 13:39).
2. He snatches the word from hearts of those who hear it but don't respond to it (Luke 8:12).
3. He may work through human beings, such as Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus (John 6:70; 13:2).
4. He is a murderer and father of lies (John 8:44).
5. He oppresses human beings, but Jesus came to set them free by healing them and doing good (Acts 10:38).
6. To be called "a son of the devil," means to be an enemy of righteousness, full of deceit and villainy, and making crooked the straight paths of the Lord (Acts 13:10).
7. Our sinful actions give the Devil an opportunity (Ephesians 4:26).
8. He rules over cosmic powers of this present darkness and over spiritual forces of evil, plotting schemes against God and His people (Ephesians 6:11-12).

We accept the conclusions of the 1995 team of archaeologists who place the site of John's baptism at Aenon, where now is located Sapsaphas ("place of the willows") near the Wadi Kharrar. After 50 years on August 11th, 1995, accompanied by Prince Ghazi Ben Muhammad a team of archaeologists could visit once again both sites guided by the soldiers guarding the border. In the field south of tell Mar Liyas they could collect some sherds of the Roman period, the first evidence of the possibility that the area had been inhabited at the time of John the Baptist and Jesus. The visit and the interest shown by the Prince to the sanctuaries in Wadi Kharrar, resulted in a royal decree being issued by King Hussein on December 10th, 1997 creating a commission to develop the Park of the Baptism of Christ on the occasion of the Christian Jubilee. In the meantime, the department of Antiquities started archaeological excavations in the area directed by M. Waheeb.

In 340 St Chariton built a chapel on the summit of the hill, and another was built by the cave in which Jesus sheltered. The Greek Orthodox church acquired the site in 1875, and in 1895 built the Sarandarion monastery (a name which refers to the forty days of Jesus's fast) half way up the hill. From the monastery a steep path runs up to the summit, on which are the remains of St Chariton's chapel and the Hasmonean fortress of Dok.
9. God's people are vulnerable to his condemnation and snares (1 Timothy 3:6-7).

10. Through his snares, he seeks to ensnare human beings and make them captives to do his will (2 Timothy 2:26).

11. Death is a power which the Devil wields over human beings making the fearful and his slaves. But by becoming a human being, Jesus came to destroy the devil (Hebrews 2:14).

12. Submission to God, followed by resisting the Devil, causes him to flee (James 4:7).

13. He is our "adversary" (antidakos), a ferocious lion intent on making human beings his prey, but firmness of faith allows them to resist him, as they share this world-wide struggle with fellow Christians (1 Peter 5:8-9).

14. Sin is "the work of the devil" which Jesus, God's Son, came to destroy. Those who make a practice of sin and those who are not consistently righteous are "of the devil" (1 John 3:8-10).

15. The Devil wants to persecute Christians (Revelation 2:10).

16. The death and resurrection of Jesus and his ascension to God's right hand led to the Devil's expulsion from heaven and his confinement to this world (Revelation 12). One helpful text is this one which uses several other words in referring to the devil:

   9 And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world- he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. 11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. 12 Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (Revelation 12:9-12).

17. He will one day be judged with "eternal fire" along with his angels (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:2, 10).

A growing interest in angels, good and evil, took place in the decades before the coming of Jesus. Pharisees believed in angels while Sadducees did not. The Old Testament book of Daniel became a common source for speculations about this topic, especially since angels seem to play a significant role in the activities of nations. Good angels waged war with bad angels "behind the scenes" (see Daniel 10:13). Two texts from the prophets intrigued scholars since they seem to suggest that an Evil Being was behind the actions of certain pagan kings who were hostile to Israel (see Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28 in their contexts).

Jesus encounters the archenemy of God who repeatedly sought to undo the work of God's good creation and seize power in the universe. By meeting Jesus, God's Son become human, in the wilderness, he hopes to undermine this latest initiative of God to restore the fallen world laid waste by the Devil's primary weapons: sin and death. In some ways, the preface to another story--that of Job--lies in the background. Satan comes to God and wants the freedom to test Job by a series of disasters, climaxing with the loss of his health. The goal: make Job curse God. In the case of Jesus, the temptations appeal to things like hunger, pride and power, but they are offered while Jesus is in a weakened state in a wilderness place. Job has his wealth and well-being stripped from him so that he is caused to act from a place of weakness. Jesus is also tempted in the extremity of his life, deprived of food and water during the forty days. In Job's case, the Devil wants to see if he will "fear God for no reason" (Job 1:9) by reducing him to bare existence.

Reading the preface to the Job story along with the temptation of Jesus is enlightening. Consider some possible parallels, as we cite actual passages from Job 1-2, and then offer conjectures in the case of Jesus.

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8 In the Isaiah passage, the foreground is a prophecy against the king of Babylon, while the background is the story of "Lucifer," the "Day Star," commonly associated with Satan or the Devil. His ambition to become like God and his subsequent judgment all become woven with the rise and fall of the Babylonian monarch who imitates him. Similar literary forms appear in Ezekiel where the king of Tyre is in the foreground, while "the anointed cherub (=angel)" who was in Eden is in the background. A complete reading of the biblical material uncovers a portrait of Satan or the Devil as an angel whose pride caused him to fall from God's favor and into the newly created world God made where he operated under the guise of a "serpent," leading human beings into sin. The fact that he was not permitted to appear in his angelic form probably reflects God's desire to level the playing field. Serpents were "beasts of the field," and human beings were empowered to have dominion over them. Yet, in this case, they failed to do so. When we arrive in the New Testament, Satan seems to fall a second time, this in response to the ascension of Jesus and Satan's being cast from heaven.
Job: God says to Satan, "Have you considered my servant, Job? There is none like him on the earth.

Jesus: God says to the Devil, "Have you considered my Son, Jesus? There is none like him in heaven or on earth, my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.

Job: Satan says to God, "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face."

Jesus: Satan says to God, "Does Jesus love you for no reason? Have you not made him both God and Man and called him your beloved one? But reduce him to a mere mortal who gets hungry, dreams for power and risks his life and he will yield to my offers and serve me instead of you.

Job: God says to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand. But if you do, spare his life."

Jesus: God says to Satan, "He is in you hand. I will not prevent you from working your will against him. Yes, you may even take his life."

In this last fictional exchange, God is laying a snare for Satan. For by offering him Jesus' life, he seems to be surrendering all control. In fact, Satan only imagines he has the last word by throwing his legions at Jesus on the cross. When Jesus breathes his last, Satan thinks he has won, mistaking weakness for defeat. That is the ploy of God, for in the end, Jesus has the last word by rising from the dead. And so, in our fictional reconstruction, God can freely say to Satan, "Yes, you may take his life."

The temptation in the wilderness is, then, part of a cosmic war between God and Satan for the human race. Jesus has become the champion for all human beings—their proxy and their representative. He has become, in the words of Luther's famous hymn, "the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing." This was not Satan's first attempt to defeat the human Jesus. Matthew wrote earlier in his Gospel about the conspiracy of Herod to kill the infant Jesus (Matthew 2). Nor will it be his last. However, in this case, Satan is sizing up his opponent, probing what he thinks might be the vulnerabilities of "God-become-human." After all, Jesus is a cosmic novelty to Satan. Nothing like this has ever before been deployed by God in His efforts to save the human race. Is not God putting Himself at considerable risk by submitting to the limitations of human existence? A clever adversary will incur limited engagements with his enemy to see how he reacts, in anticipation of future incursions or major operations, perhaps for the end-game. Remember, the Scripture writes about the devil's "schemes, wiles, devices," as demonstrated by the texts cited above. He will now apply those stratagems to the human Jesus.

**Temptation One: He Was Hungry**

When my three children each graduated from college with a modicum of student loan debt, I counseled each of them, "Hunger is a great motivator." From time to time, they remind me of my sage advice, with good result. In the case of Jesus, however, hunger becomes a substantial vulnerability for Jesus. Matthew introduces the approach of the Devil with the words, "the tempter came to him and said..." (4:3). The Greek word for "tempter" is the present active participle from the verb peirazō. Literally, he is "the tempting one," that is his nature and his work, to put human beings to the test so as to find fault with them and disqualify them. In the case of Jesus, he comes to Jesus, knowing full well what "the voice" had said about Jesus at his baptism: "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." As if to make God out to be a liar or as if to prove God wrong, the tempter puts the claim made by the voice to the test. The "hypothesis" subjected to "testing" is this claim: "If you are the Son of God..." (Greek: ei huios ei tou theou, "if Son you are of God"). The temptation cuts two ways. On the one hand, it obviously is an attempt to defeat Jesus the human being ("Son"). On the other hand, it is an assault on the honorable word of God who put Himself on the line with his broadly voiced claim about Jesus as His beloved Son ("of God").

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Mere bread is food for a hungry person. On the face of it that doesn't seem to be an issue. The question facing Jesus in this first temptation is not the legitimacy of eating bread to satisfy hunger. The devil does not place an elegant banquet before Jesus, decked out with rich foods and fine drink. Nor does he command Jesus to produce some sumptuous fare from the stones lying scattered about on the wilderness floor. "Just bread, Jesus, it's only bread that you are being asked to create. You who made the worlds from nothing and formed human beings from dust, can it be at all inappropriate to perform a little miracle here to end your hunger pangs? We both know you will perform many miracles once this kingdom movement gets underway. What's wrong with doing a little one to sustain your famished frame? Won't you feed 5,000 one day soon? Why not be like Moses and practice a little bit here before you stand before the masses and perform the live show!" Such justification from Satan is not hard to imagine. "Prove you are the Son of God by doing the works of God--the works of creation. Did not God feed the Israelites in the wilderness with manna from heaven? Should you do less?"

On the surface, all of this seems so reasonable--especially to a hungry man. Where is the deception? It lies, no doubt, at least in part, with the entirely selfish nature of the invitation. How many hungry people resided within the borders of national Israel? How many widows, orphans, outcasts--not to mention the collective poor--awoke each day to the prospect of begging for their next meal, or, worse, dying for lack of one? For Jesus to accede to Satan's snare would entail forgetting the reason he had come. Later, Matthew would quote Jesus' words, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life…" (20:28). Shortly, Jesus would ask the crowds rhetorically in the Sermon on the Mount, "Is not life more than food?" (Matthew 6:25). Knowing all of this, in advance, Jesus acts on the basis of his surrendered life, rather than from a heart filled with selfish desire for mere self-preservation. Or, as he would say in John 6:35, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his will."

Moreover, Jesus saw hunger as more than a physical need. There were other kinds of hunger, and he would express one of them in his soon-to-be-delivered Sermon: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfaction" (Matthew 5:6). Hunger for righteousness means a need desire for God to work His righteous will "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). It means for God's Law to be equitably applied to all those who need His mercy and grace, not just the favored few. While it is true that feeding the hungry is part of that righteous work, it is not true that a single human being, isolated in the wilderness, working for his own benefit by turning stones into bread, could ever--in that private selfish way--achieve the righteousness of God.

And so Jesus, no doubt thinking these sorts of things, reaches for a text from Deuteronomy to overturn the temptation. We commented above (pages 5-7) about the aptness of Jesus using Deuteronomy to re-enact Israel's story through his own life. Deuteronomy was written near the end of Moses' life. It was part of a covenant renewal ceremony in which a new generation of Israelites re-committed themselves to God in preparation to enter the land of Canaan. After three chapters of fast-paced history, chapter 4 commences a section of commandments and instructions, often beginning with the words, "Hear, O Israel…," and climaxing with the famous shema, "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is One" (6:4). But it is when Moses reviews the forty years Israel spent in the wilderness, that he reminds them how Yahweh "tested them in order to humble them and to know what was in their heart by allowing them to go hungry so that He might feed them with manna, the bread from heaven" (8:2-3). This manna (which in Hebrew means "what is it?") was something entirely new to both Israel and their forefathers, and this novelty--this fact that nobody could explain what manna was or where it came from--was calculated to teach Israel this truth: "Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (8:3).

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9 The name Deuteronomy is actually the creation of those Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek, a version known as the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX). It consists of two Greek words: deuteros, meaning "second," and nomos, meaning "law." Since the book was written just a few days before Moses' death and the entrance into Canaan under Joshua, this name reflects its nature as a covenant renewal document: it re-stated Torah for a new generation of Hebrews and called on them to renew their covenant with Yahweh in the process. In the Hebrew language, the book's title is simply "these are the words.'
And that was the text and the context of the Scripture which Jesus quoted to the Devil. Based on that setting for Jesus' quotation, he was telling the Devil, "God knows what's in "my heart" and has allowed me 'to go hungry' so that He might feed me with every word which comes from His mouth. Were I to command these stones to become bread, I would be living by your word and not His." The fully human Jesus proved himself faithful to the great shema, "to love Yahweh God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength." In so doing he refused the invitation of God's archenemy and also stood in Israel's place, being for Israel what Israel failed to be, but did so for their sake and benefit.

In this first temptation, Jesus also stood where the first human pair stood. Whereas they saw that the fruit "was good for food" (Genesis 3:6a) Jesus saw that stones-made-bread were not good for food. For anything to be pronounced "good," it must come "from the mouth of God." Only God can create values by which to judge "good and evil." We call this first temptation, The Lust of the Flesh, for it parallels precisely the temptation in Eden. Jesus faced squarely the seduction to meet his own fleshly needs and rely on his Messianic powers to do so. Where our human parents failed, Jesus succeeded.

Temptation Two: He Was On the Pinnacle of the Temple

Once more, the Devil appeals to the baptismal claim that Jesus is the "Son of God." In the second temptation, Jesus is "transported" to what Matthew calls the "pinnacle of the Temple." This was the highest point of the "royal colonnade" built by Herod within the temple. Solomon's Porch, one of the "cloisters," was also located here and overlooked the Kidron Valley. The historian Josephus gives an interesting description:

This cloister deserves to be mentioned better than any other under the sun; for, while the valley was very deep, and its bottom could not be seen if you looked from above into the depth, this farther vastly high elevation of the cloister stood upon that height, insomuch that if any one looked down from the top of the battlements, or down both those altitudes, he would be giddy, while his sight could not reach to such an immense depth. Antiquities, Book 15, Chap.11:5

The distance was likely some seven hundred feet. From here a priest on the highest pinnacle would wait for the dawn, and then signal the beginning of services for the day. He would then command his waiting fellows below to offer the morning sacrifice.

From the Jewish Midrash (Pesiqta Rabbati, 162a) we read about the Jewish belief that Messiah would appear standing on the roof of the temple. Not on any roof but "the" roof, as it states in the NT using the definite article "the pinnacle" (Greek: epi to pterugion tou hierou).10 No doubt Satan enticed Jesus with this temptation in order to fulfill Malachi 3:1 ahead of God's time:

Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

The rabbis also believed that the person identified in Psalm 91 is none other than the Messiah. This is exactly where Satan misquoted the Scripture about the angels: "He shall give His angels charge concerning you (and) in their hands they shall bear you up...." The Devil, sensing the importance of Scripture in Jesus' life, attempts to use this Psalm (91:11) as support for the second temptation. He placed Jesus in a holy place and then quoted holy Scripture in order to influence him. Had Jesus yielded, the display would have been dramatic and spectacular. In this second temptation we witness a seduction to indulge The Pride of Life.

There is yet another association with the Temple: it was a place of safety. The Greek word for "pinnacle" is actually based on the root pterux which means "wing." The rabbis had a tendency to draw parallels between the names for things and their underlying nuances. In this case, the "wing" would be the protecting care of the mother bird (probably an eagle) for her young. The Temple was God's "nest" and He hovered over His own who came there for safety (see Ruth 2:12; Psalm 61:4; 91:4). By contrast, Jesus would later connect his own desire to protect Israel with the "wing" metaphor, applying this role to himself and not to the Temple which

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10 Later in church history, James, brother of Jesus and leader of the Church in Jerusalem, was martyred by being thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple Mount.
would one day be destroyed (see Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34). The Devil invites Jesus, then, to live the "safe life" within the Temple where God's angels would bear him up. Instead, Jesus will choose the dangerous life outside the Temple where he will face suffering and death, "outside" the Temple (see Hebrews 13:13), marked by suffering and shame. In fact, Matthew 26:53 would later record the words of Jesus to the effect that he "could call twelve legions of angels" to rescue him from the present trial and certain death, but he set aside that option.

The second temptation of Jesus parallels the statement found in the Eden temptation story, "desired to make one wise" (Genesis 3:6c). That is, what the human pair wanted was the reputation of being wise. For Jesus, no such "sign" of public recognition was needed. His relationship with the Temple would be much more complicated, leading him to challenge its leaders, overturn the tables of money changers in its courts, and finally predicted its eventual fall. More important than an extravagant prideful demonstration of Messianic power would be Jesus' own death and resurrection which he described as "destroying this temple and raising it up in three days" (John 2:19; Mark 14:58; Matthew 26:61). As it turned out Jesus would indeed "come suddenly to his temple," but not for the purpose of getting attention, but for judgment. If angels figured into the narrative, it would be in the role of messengers, announcing his resurrection to incredulous witnesses at the garden tomb. After all, if Jesus is indeed the "Son of God," why would he need angels to "bear him up?" "Scripture twisting" originated with the Serpent's earliest effort to convince the humans in Eden that God didn't mean what he said, as illustrated by the question "Has God said?" followed by the assertion "you will not surely die."

In response, Jesus remains calmly and consistently grounded in the Deuteronomy passage. From there he cites 8:16, "You shall not put Yahweh your God to the test, as you tested Him at Massah." Jesus interprets the Devil's second temptation as a "test of God," rooted in unbelief rather than in trust. The Devil seems to be saying, "Jesus, you need some hard evidence that your are the Messiah, and that God will come to your aid if you put your life at risk." Jesus, by his quotation, is telling the Devil that he needs no such proof, and for him to seek it makes him no different than the unbelieving Israelites in the wilderness a millennium and a half before. The word of his Father at the baptism was sufficient to establish his Messianic claim. Wanting more would simply exhibit distrust of His Father's own good word.

Temptation Three: He Was On a High Mountain
From north to south in central Israel is the geographical feature known as the "central highlands," and they pass through Judea in the south. Jerusalem itself sits atop seven hillocks, one of which is explicitly called Mount Zion. Elsewhere, to the east of this range, one finds a famous hilltop known as either Mount Nebo or Mount Pisgah. Its importance lies with Moses' last hours on earth. From this vantage point, high above the Jordan Valley, Moses sees the land of Canaan, his last great vision before he dies and God where buries him in an unknown place:

1 Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, 2 all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, 3 the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. 4 And the LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, 'I will give it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there." 5 So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD, 6 and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day (Deuteronomy 34:1-6)

The statement, "And Yahweh showed him all the land..." parallels Matthew's account of the third temptation: "Again the Devil took him to a very high mountain and he show him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory...all these things I will give you..." (4:8-9). The difference, of course, is that Moses heard these words from the one true God of Israel who had bound Himself by covenant to Abraham and his descendants, promising them this land. Moreover, in Moses' case, he was allowed to see, but "shall not go over there," a rather anti-climatic end to the vision. The Devil makes much of showing Jesus "all the kingdoms and their glory," and then, in exchange for worshipping himself, offers them to Jesus. According to the rabbis, when God
showed Moses "the land," He was, in effect, showing him the whole world,\(^{11}\) since he looked "in all directions." The New Testament agrees that God's promise to Abraham meant he would "inherit the world" (see Romans 4:13), even as Jesus would soon tell Israel, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). Obviously bowing down to the Devil is far from "meekness," and the very fact that this temptation entices Jesus with "the glory" of the world's kingdoms, shows how much the Devil relies on what Jesus sees in order to ensnare him.

Luke's account, at this point, expands on Matthew's, explaining the Devil's power to make this offer:

...and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will" (Luke 4:6).

This additional justification for the Devil's offer borrows language from Daniel where it is God, not the Devil, who "gives" the kingdoms of this world "to whomever he wills..." (Daniel 4:17, 25, 32). Ironically, it was king Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, who eventually spoke those words after being judged by God for his pride in thinking that he, not God, conferred power on himself. Moreover, in the closing verses of Matthew (28:19-20), Jesus will utter the words, "All authority in heaven on earth is given to me..."--the rationale for the Great Commission. That authority came not from the Devil, but from God Himself, having raised Jesus from the dead. Yes, Jesus would one day receive the kingdoms of this world, but only after passing through suffering and death on the cross, and then it would be God who would "highly exalt him" (Philippians 2:9-11). In majestic words, the last book of the Bible declares:

15 Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." 16 And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. 18 The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth" (Revelation 11:15-18).

Notice how, in this passage, the people of God "fell on their faces and worshiped God." This, of course, is the point Jesus will make to the Devil.

The conclusion of the third temptation begins with Jesus ordering the Devil with these words: "go away from me, Satan," from the Greek hupage, Satana. The verb is an imperative form of hupagō, and it is in the present tense, suggesting that Jesus wants this Adversary to stay away from him. Jesus was fully aware that Satan was ruler of this world and hostile to God (John 12:31; 16:11; 2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 John 5:19),\(^{12}\) known also as the "prince" whose kingdom was "darkness" (Luke 22:53; John 14:30; Ephesians 2:2; and others). This is a command by Jesus, the Messianic King, to a rebel ruler of a renegade government set up in the world since the Fall of the first human pair. Once more, Jesus uses the Scriptures, from Deuteronomy 6:13, to silence the tempter, and, in this case, send him away. "Worship God alone; only serve him," is the essence of this quotation. The citation follows, in the text, the famous shema. "This is my Father's world," Jesus implies, "and it's not yours to give. Only my Father is God, worthy of worship and service." Ultimately the strongest defense against the "wiles of the devil" is a robust view of the nature of God. Those who have a weak understanding of God, and their obligations to Him, falter in the face of temptation. If only God is worthy to receive "glory, honor and praise" (Revelation 4:11; 5:12; 7:12), then all such temptations to serve the devil are defective.

As the devil leaves him, angels appear, offering Jesus their service. The Greek verbs Matthew uses here create the impression that the devil is in the process of leaving (present tense of aphiēmi) when suddenly ("Behold!", Greek: idou) the angels come (aorist tense of prosēchomai) and engage in service (Greek: imperfect tense of diakoneō, "to serve, wait on, care for, provide for") for him. The word "deacon" comes from the same root as this verb. The role of angels in the arrival of God's kingdom was well established in the literature of that time. Within Judaism, angels took on exceptional importance after Israel came under the domination of powerful

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nations. Perhaps God's people needed the confidence that "behind the scenes" Yahweh had his agents, carrying out His plans in spite of what the nations might scheme (see Psalm 2). Even ancient Israel saw God's care for them in the wilderness as "the bread of angels" (Psalm 78:25), while, by contrast, His judgments came at the hands of "destroying angels" (Psalm 78:49). The Psalms further command the angels, "Bless Yahweh, O you his angels, you mighty ones who obey his word, obeying the voice of his word" (103:20). Did not Jacob, in his wilderness flight, encounter the ministration of angels, "ascending and descending" on "the ladder from heaven to earth" (Genesis 28:12ff), who, on his way, met "the angels of God" (32:1)? Finally, in Daniel's vision of "the Son of Man," a reference to the Messiah, we read about the angelic hosts in large numbers "serving him" (Daniel 7:10).

The devil was himself once an angel. No doubt, Matthew invites drama in his portrayal of the departure of Satan from Jesus: as he is leaving, the angels are coming!

In this third temptation, we witness The Lust of the Eyes as the devil's enticement to Jesus. "He showed him all the kingdoms of the world…" This parallels the words of Genesis 3 where the humans look at the forbidden fruit and note that it is "pleasant to the eyes" (Genesis 3:6b).

Throughout our discussion of Jesus' temptation, we have noted the ways he re-lived the temptations in the Garden of Eden which ensnared the first humans: the 1) lust of the flesh; 2) lust of the eyes; 3) pride of life. These are also the phrases which define "the world" which stands opposed to God in 1 John 2:

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.
16 For all that is in the world- the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions- is not from the Father but is from the world. 17 And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:15-17).

Jesus chose "the will of God" in each case. He knew the world was "passing away," because a new one was about to dawn in and through his own work. The love of His Father was truly in him, as witnessed by the "voice" heard at his baptism: "my beloved Son…" Jesus chose the path of suffering and death in order that through the resurrection he might "abide forever." He refused the short-cut path of gratuitous miracles, prideful displays of power and selfish ambition.

Temptation Lessons: The Jesus Who Shares Our Human Journey
Two passages from the epistles of the New Testament connect the temptations of Jesus with our own. From Hebrews we are told:

14 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. 15 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. 16 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 (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Not only does this text invite us to "relate to Jesus," it calls on us "to hold fast to our confession" of him. Moreover, it encourages us to confidently approach God in prayer, since the throne of His kingdom is one of grace, where mercy flows in time of need. To stand with Jesus in the place of temptation means to draw near to the throne of grace. Here is one who knows our weakness and was tempted "as we are." The fact that Jesus was God's Son does not make him less able to identify with us, but more able to do so. The divinity of Jesus was not give him "leg up" on all difficult trials he faced, but rather was the very reason he was able to share in all of our weakness and suffering, including temptation. His divinity did not spare him from our temptations, it drove him to face them. In yet another part of Hebrews, the writer reminds his audience:

8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9 And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Hebrews 5:8-9).

"Although a son..." is a powerful phrase, implying that the Sonship of Jesus in no way exempted him, even in temptation, from the struggles of the humanity he freely accepted when he "became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14).
Tempted in a Garden (Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7)

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.  16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden;  17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." … 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"  2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,  3 but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"  4 "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman.  5 "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."  6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.  7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Had you asked a young Jewish boy, at the time of his bar-mitzvah, "Give us an example of temptation in the Torah," he would most certainly have cited the story of Man and Woman before the Fall in the Garden of Eden. We might call Genesis 3:1-7, "The Anatomy of Temptation." After all, this is where sin began for human beings, told in story form, a kind of haggadah on the origin of sin. Let's make some brief, but pertinent observations about it.

Prior to Genesis 3, Yahweh God had given specific instructions to the human couple, known as "Man" (ʾîsh) and "Woman" (ʾîshâh). They had heard His voice (the qôl), received His blessing, and received His word. Two trees marked two places: "the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, the place for making a judgment for Good and against Evil; "the tree of life," the place for inheriting eternal life on God's initiative.

1. They were not in the wilderness, however, but in a garden paradise where no animals were "wild," and where all their needs were supplied. Under these favorable circumstances, they encountered temptation, the first great battle faced by being human beings.

2. Their adversary came in the guise of a fellow creature, a serpent (naḥash, "the shining one"), whose smooth words seemed to advocate for their cause. "Has God said?" is his leading question to the humans, and the Woman takes the bait. She tries to clarify, defend, and enhance what God said. The serpent presses the case, denying that humans will die for making their own moral choices, symbolized by "eating" from the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil. Instead, giving the distinct impression that he "knows" more than the humans, he attributes a hidden motive to God, calling into question "what God said."

3. "You shall be as God, knowing Good and Evil." This is the word of the Serpent, the planter of doubt and the purveyor of falsehood. The choice facing the human pair is between the word of God and this novel word calculated to take the place of God.

4. This shrewd temptation to sin awaited a response. Curiously, the words "tempt" or "temptation" do not appear in the story. In fact, the Hebrew Bible has no distinct term "to tempt." But the Genesis story informs the reader that the Serpent was more "shrewd" (Hebrew: ārûm) than all the "living creatures of the field" (3:1). Shrewd beings practice strategies calculated to give them an "edge," and place their potential adversaries at a disadvantage. When we examine the New Testament, we find that the common word for "tempt" is peirazô with meanings consistent with such shrewdness: "to obtain information to be used against a person by trying to cause someone to make a mistake; to try to trap, to attempt to catch in a mistake."

5. In that regard, the Old Testament is filled with uses of the Hebrew word mōqēsh, "trap, snare, lure", derived from the verb form yāqōsh. For a trap to work, the bait must be something the unsuspecting victim wants. The Serpent knew something about human nature, even in its pre-fallen state. Human beings aspire to grow

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13 In the one possible passage, Genesis 22:1, where the King James Version said "God did tempt Abraham," the underlying Hebrew word is nāṣāh which means to "test, prove, try."
14 Louw-Nida Lexicon, 27.31.
and acquire dominion over creation by God's design. Take this desire, manipulate it, twist it, and it becomes a trap for human beings to fall into selfishness and godlessness.

6. Did the Serpent succeed with his "trap"? The Genesis story proceeds to describe what humanity did in response to the "snare":

So 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 to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate (Genesis 3:6)

7. Three distinct snares appear in this "temptation:"
   a. "Good for food" appeals to the desire of "the flesh."
   b. "Delight to the eyes" appeals to the desire of "the eyes."
   c. "Desired to make one wise" appeals to "selfish pride."

8. Without question, the same pattern appears in the temptation of Jesus. How is this significant? The first human pair, collectively called "Adam--male and female," surrounded by optimal circumstances and endowed with the dignity of God's image, were snared by these three traps. Their choices set a fateful precedent for those who descended from these first human beings. That is, sin became hereditary and habitual, reinforced by its presence in every successive generation. A deadly cycle of temptation, bad choice, sin and death followed. For centuries human beings re-enacted the events in Eden without deviation. Who would break this cycle?

9. An "intervention" would be needed, requiring another human being who could stand where the original pair once stood, surrounded by the glory of God. That person was Jesus, a human being, to be sure, but at the same time God's Son, bearing the glory of God. He would need to face temptation without the advantages of the garden, which no longer existed. However, he would need to resist the snares of the tempter, and establish a new precedent: humanity without sin. At the same time, he would need to undo the damage inflicted by sin, releasing enslaved humanity. This would require yet a "last temptation," encountered in the Garden of Gethsemane and climaxed on the cross where he would accept "the cup" of suffering and death on behalf of the human race. Finally, he would need to defeat the "last enemy," death itself through resurrection life. In this triumphant event, Jesus would appear, not in the wilderness again, but in a garden, as if to announce to the human race, "I have brought you back where this all begin, but this time as a human being enjoying the benefits of the tree of everlasting life--resurrection life."

Getting Serious about Sin (Psalm 32)

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. 2 Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. 3 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Selah 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah 6 Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. 7 You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah 8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. 9 Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. 10 Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. 11 Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!

Several key words neatly divide this psalm. In 32:1-2 the psalmist twice refers to the “blessed” as those whose sin has been summarily dealt with. In 32:3-4 he tells how sin had ravaged his humanity — a haunting reminder of the future which lies ahead unless human beings come to grips with this “ancient foe.” A sharp disjunctive word — “then” — appears at 32:5 where the psalmist made a decision to confess and God responded with forgiveness. Taken as a unit, 32:1-5 conveys the personal history of the writer with his sins. Put simply, he told his story.

What follows in 32:6-7 begins with the key word “Therefore.” This term functions as a transitional word in which the psalmist becomes a teacher to “everyone who is godly.” He counsels that sinners must begin with
honest speech to God: they must pray. This prayer gains confidence from knowing that sin’s flood, with its “mighty waters,” need not overwhelm the godly person. Further, to the sinner seeking forgiveness, God is a “hiding place,” faithful in protecting from trouble and surrounding with songs of rescue. Deliverance from sin — in the long-term — requires something beyond forgiveness, according to 32:8-9. Confession and forgiveness as remedial; what is needed is something preventative. Words like “instruct, teach, counsel, and watch over” imply the efforts of a patient and wise teacher who guides his student from being a novice to being a master. God desires His people to have mastery over sin. The emotional lives of the godly and the wicked are sharply contrasted in 32:9-10. Godly people treat sin as serious business, go to great lengths to deal with it, and don’t quit until the sin problem has been finally settled. They find themselves “surrounded by love” and fully trusting in the Lord. Their hearts overflow with joy, gladness, and song because their hearts are upright.

Wicked people are full of “woes.” The Hebrew word used here means “sorrows” (mak’ōb, pain of the mental kind).

A Tale of Two Men (Romans 5:12-19)

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—13 for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come. 15 But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! 16 Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. 17 For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. 18 Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. 19 For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

The major theme of the preceding section of Romans 5 (1-11) has to do with God’s reconciliation with fallen humanity, thanks to Christ’s death and shed blood “for us” (5:8). God’s love created a new human situation which sought to undo the old human situation created by the sin of Adam. Prior to Christ’s achievement, we were “powerless” (5:6), “sinners” (5:8), and facing “wrath” on the day of judgment (5:9). We had been “God’s enemies” (5:10), but we are now His friends. This is the true meaning of reconciliation.

Our reading this week from 5:12-19 begins with the word “therefore” (Greek: dia touto, “because of this”), indicating that Paul wishes to show the implication or results of what he has been telling his audience in the previous sections. A series of comparisons follows, preceded by the phrase “just as” (Greek: hôsper, “as it were”). “As it were,” one man let sin into the world, and death followed right behind sin! That’s why all human beings die: they are all infected with sin, thanks to the careless conduct of one man who opened the door to sin. Death, Paul concludes, is not the result of a sentence passed by Torah (“the law”), though Torah would eventually hand down such sentences for sin. “Death reigned” before the Torah was given to Moses. Thanks to sin, death had achieved a status all its own; sin had given to death the keys to the human kingdom. This disastrous situation affecting all human beings began with the actions of one man, Adam.

It should not surprise us, then, that the actions of another man are capable of affecting all human beings as well. Paul calls this man “the one to come,” and says that Adam functions as a “pattern” for this coming man in the sense that though he was only one man, he could affect all human beings — this time in a positive and beneficial way. What Adam did by opening the door to sin and death is here called a “trespass” and “the trespass of one man.” The word “trespass” (Greek: paraptōma) implies stepping over a boundary and entering where one is not welcome or invited. Intruders trespass. Thieves trespass. Persons invading the privacy of others trespass. Sin is a trespass — it comes into the life-space of another by deception or by force. Adam succumbed to trickery by failing to challenge the suggestions of the serpent with the Word of God. The result was sin as trespass. Sin acts contrary to free will and violates its sacred domain.
“But,” Paul asserts in 5:15, “the gift is not like the trespass.” The gift does not forcibly mock the freedom and goodwill of human beings, but instead offers itself as something given — something to be received. Sin as trespass did not ask human beings for permission to drag death along with the bargain. The serpent acted fraudulently and deceptively, sneaking death into human life without human permission. The gift is not like that. The gift approaches human beings as “grace” delivered by “the one man, Jesus Christ,” overflowing “to the many.” The contrast between trespass and gift goes further, since sin affected all without exception, whereas, the gift affected the many who would receive it. Sin was indiscriminate, imposing its will on all.

These sharp contrasts between sin/death and gift/Jesus reinforce the imagery of this passage. In Romans 5 we see the clash of the kingdoms, no less vividly than what we read in the temptation of Jesus. Paul does not mention Satan — he doesn’t need to. Sin and death are the personifications of evil let loose in the world by the choices of Adam. The coming of Jesus Christ is the arrival of the kingdom from heaven, and he immediately does battle with the occupying forces. Appropriately, the Lenten season under this rubric begins with God’s determination to take back the world from the illegitimate powers which have seized it. The battle lines are drawn: On the one side stand trespass, disobedience, and condemnation; on the other side stand grace, righteousness, and the free gift. Sin and death command the one side; Jesus Christ, the other. Who will rule the world? That is the question which saturates this text.

Victory comes through “the obedience of the one man” who defeats sin and death, along with their warriors in battle array. Those who share in this victory “reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.” To them are given the “provision of grace” and “the gift of righteousness.” The Lenten season begins with the foreshadowing of this victory in the desert. From the waste land without water and food comes the Son of God who says “No!” to the seduction of sin and death and “Yes!” in obedience to the commands of his Father. In the desert, the Last Adam has done what the first Adam failed to do: he obeyed the word of God.

As he journeys through the desert toward the place of human enslavement, Jesus embodies the love of the caring God who hears the cries of Adam’s children under the rule of sin. He has a date with destiny beyond the desert where a taskmaster harsher than Pharaoh rules, and where his sacrifice will surpass the Passover Lamb.

Conclusion
Jesus is our companion through the human desert. He freely chooses this way. Once here, however, he accepts the burden of the journey where the Spirit “drives him.” Sons of Adam and daughters of Eve belong to the rag-tag company of wilderness travelers. They have been expelled from Eden, and the flaming sword keeps them from the tree of life. Yet in their desert exile, Jesus meets them: a stranger first, unknown but familiar. They watch him do battle with evil, and they are emboldened by what they see. Satan must leave, for he cannot abide where the Last Adam refuses to surrender the desert to him. Why would Jesus defend the desert and deny the tempter any ground in this forsaken place? That is the wondrous mystery of Lent, as we consider the desert as the place of new beginnings.

The term desert is often used metaphorically and psychologically, not geographically or ecologically. The so-called desert is any place of solitude, simplicity, and emptiness — a barren wasteland, figuratively — to which one withdraws for undistracted communication with God. One closes one’s eyes and blocks out the other senses in order to experience the Spirit with the utmost clarity. The process is seemingly transcendental rather than sacramental.16

When we join Jesus in the desert, we leave behind the sanitized world that is unaffected by the anguish of pain and the anchor of space. The soul is trimmed down to leanness, and the body is reminded of its dependence on God. Kathleen Norris writes, “A person is forced inward by the spareness of what is outward and visible in all

this land and sky. …what seems stern and almost empty is merely open, a door into some simple and holy state.”¹⁷

Being with Christ in the Desert exposes us to a fierce landscape where our inward life is forced out in the open where we discover the sometimes awful truth that we are also a desert within. There lurk deep fears, loss of competence, crisis of knowing that brings us to the end of ourselves. In this barren place, Jesus brings us beyond language, beyond control, beyond what is safe, and we encounter the prowling beast who is the enemy of God. The desert is both a place of exceeding terror and elating wonder: good and terrible at the same time. We are reminded of Narnia’s landscape:

The Lion was coming on, always singing, with a slow, heavy pace … Though its soft pads made no noise, you could feel the earth shake beneath their weight … The children could not move. They were not even quite sure that they wanted to. The Lion paid no attention to them … It passed by them so close that could have touched its mane. They were terribly afraid it would turn and look at them, yet in some queer way they wished it would.¹⁸

Faced by the desert, we know the vulnerability necessary for trust. Our lives are at risk before the mystery of the Lion’s face, and yet we desire him to look at us. Exposed to the wilderness, our life undergoes a painful upheaval, and we face God and our mortal enemy without sufficient language to describe it. Here are the flashes of Mount Sinai, situated in fire and smoke and an earthquake. Here are the voices of discontent, asking if God even cares. Here is Jesus alone with the tempter. Soon, here will be the agonizing cross where God shares with us the deepest vulnerability. With Jesus in the desert, God also loses everything — only to find it again for the sake of love. The desert demands the last word. The desert shows us the face of the broken Christ in the fields of emptiness. People die in the desert, and he dies there also. Lent draws us into this God-forsaken place where God can be found once again.¹⁹

Glory to God. Amen.

Digger Deeper: Ashes to Fire: With Jesus in the Desert
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of Ashes to Fire: With Jesus in the Desert carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org, or pick up a copy of the Background Notes at the Information desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. As we enter the Lenten season, consider some ways you might follow Jesus to the cross and beyond. Think about using the devotional Ashes to Fire to guide your journey. Using a dictionary, explore the meaning of the word “Lent.” Distinguish between Lent, Easter, and Pentecost within the Christian calendar. What are the benefits of observing “sacred time” in our Christian walk?

2. The focus of this week’s study is “With Jesus in the Desert,” and the first reading from Matthew 4:1-11 explores the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Briefly describe Jesus’ physical condition and its causes. In what ways does the desert experience shape the way Jesus approached his temptation by “the devil”? Look up the meaning of the word “devil,” and indicate why this is an appropriate title for the tempter.

3. What recurring question does the devil pose to Jesus, and why is this an appropriate guiding theme for Lent? What evidence do we have from this text that Jesus overcame the doubt implied by the devil’s questions? How did Jesus counter the probing doubt created by the devil?

4. List the three temptations, and suggest how each one tested both Jesus’ humanity and his divinity. What did the devil want to achieve by tempting Jesus in these three ways? Discuss the relevance of these temptations to our situation. What aspects of our lives does temptation exploit? In what sense might we be “in the desert” when temptation comes to us? Why is “the desert” an appropriate image for our struggle with life’s issues?

5. Our second reading is Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and has to do with the temptation of the first human pair. How is the setting of this event different from that in Matthew 4? What does this difference suggest about the relative severity of each experience? In what ways is the temptation of the man and the woman in Genesis 3 similar to that of Jesus? As you think about your answer refer also to 1 John 2:15-17.

6. The tempter in Genesis 3 is not directly called “the devil.” What figure is used instead, and what difference does that make in understanding the Genesis temptation story?

7. Study Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:8-9 as you think about the temptations of the first pair and of Jesus.

8. The third reading is from Psalm 32. What word does the poet use to divide his poem into sections? Briefly outline the poem, labeling each section with its main idea. Discuss the ways sin harasses, tempts, and weakens the poet. How does he find victory over his situation?

9. What advice does the poet give to his audience in Psalm 32? Where does he go to find assurance in his struggle? How does God become a source of strength for him?

10. What role does praise have in the poet’s recovery? List the different words for praise found in this psalm. Comment on this statement: “There is music in the desert.”

11. Our last reading, Romans 5:12-19, might well be titled, “A Tale of Two Men.” Who are the two men, and why does Paul discuss them in this passage? Make two columns on a piece of paper, and title them with the names of these two men. Using action words (verbs) list what each one has done or is doing. Comment on the contrasts.

12. Look for words which mean “rule” or “reign.” How are they important in telling the story of the Two Men?

13. In what sense are all humans “in the desert”? What makes life into a desert, according to this passage? How has Jesus changed all of that, according to Paul?