Deuteronomy 26:1–11

**“When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, 2you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. 3And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, ‘I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us.’ 4Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God.**

**5“And you shall make response before the Lord your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. 6And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. 7Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. 9And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the Lord your God and worship before the Lord your God. 11And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.**

Romans 10:8b–13

**“The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. 11For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” 12For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.**

Luke 4:1–13

**And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness 2for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. 3The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” 4And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’ ” 5And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, 6and 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. 7If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” 8And Jesus answered him, “It is written, “ ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’ ”**

**9And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10for it is written, “ ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,’ 11and “ ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’ ” 12And Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ” 13And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.**

The word “if” is one of the most influential words and seems to cause the most trouble.  These two little letters are responsible for people losing whole periods of life as they agonize over "what if?" "What if I had done this?  What if I hadn't done that?  Maybe things would be different."  Closely related to this life-derailing mindset is the "if only" game that we so often engage in when things aren't going as planned.  "If only things could be different.  If only we did this instead of that."  There's also the sense of uncertainty that this little two-letter conjunction so powerfully conveys.  "If I get my job back…, if so-and-so gets their life together…, if things don't change…."  We don't know what the future holds, and it's that uncertainty that can drive someone crazy.

Finally, the word “if” wields the most power, influence and potential harm in its conditional nature. "If you really love me; if you want to keep your job; if you want to keep this quiet and make sure no one else finds out, then you will do this, that, and the other thing for me."  You've probably never given it much thought before today, but like I said: that simple two-letter conjunction is extremely powerful, influential, and has tremendous potential to cause great harm and chaos in our lives.

With this in mind it should come as no surprise that in our Gospel today we hear Satan himself wielding this powerful two-letter conditional sword against Christ Jesus in an attempt to bring some sinful harm and chaos into the already troubled life of Jesus.  After forty days of fasting in the middle of the desert wilderness the devil comes to Jesus with three simple propositions.  "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.  If you fall down and worship me, all of this earthly authority and glory will be yours.  If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from this highest point on the temple and let God's angels catch you."  Do you notice what the devil is NOT doing here?  He's not forcing and coercing, scaring Jesus into doing something against His will.  Rather, the devil is using an almost childish playground approach against Jesus.  "If you really are the Son of God, prove it!  I dare you!

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But Jesus didn't bite.  He didn't give in to such sinful foolishness.  He didn't give in to the temptations aimed at exploiting the most basic human weaknesses; weaknesses like an empty stomach, or selfish feelings of no respect or power or authority, or the weakness of doing whatever you want and then expecting God to cover for you.  But that's just it: Jesus didn't give in and fall prey to very basic temptations that you and I fall prey to all the time.  Our Lord met and countered every temptation with the unerring and all-sufficient Word of God.  He didn't enter into a debate or argument with the devil.  He didn't try to reason with the devil.  He simply countered the lies with the Word of God alone.

So naturally we conclude; if you want to beat the devil when you're tempted then you just need to do what Jesus did.  It makes sense, right?  Well…I don't mean to burst your bubble, but such a conclusion is actually wrong.  It's amazing how good "saved by faith alone" Christians can become so foolishly synergistic and method-oriented in their faith.  What I mean is that people wrongly approach this text as a model for what we need to do in our life as we confront temptations.  "What would Jesus do?  Simple!  The answer is right here.  All we need to do is simply copy Jesus and everything will work out just fine.  Follow this method; follow the poster-boy Jesus, and you too can triumph over the devil!"

Here's what is so wrong about this approach: If Jesus is the poster-boy example of what you need to do in your own life; if Jesus' actions against Satan are nothing more than easy-to-follow examples that we must duplicate in our own lives, then why did Jesus have to take on our flesh and suffer and die?  If it comes down to nothing more than "do what Jesus did," then our salvation would no longer be grounded in faith and grace.  It would be founded upon the rock of personal willpower and self-righteous works.  "Do what Jesus did, and if that's not working for you, then try harder!" I don't know about you, but I can confess that if my salvation hinged upon my abilities to be just like Jesus, I would be doomed, no matter how hard I tried!

And that's just it: I can't be just like Jesus.  I can't do what Jesus did.  This is precisely why Jesus came to do what He did, because I can't do it!  And the same goes for every person borne of sinful Adam.  What we see here in this Gospel lesson is not a method or how-to guide in overcoming temptation and beating the devil.  We see our perfect and complete substitute taking our place and doing perfectly what we fail at miserably, all so that His perfection could be credited to us for our salvation.

Jesus Christ isn't just our substitute on the Good Friday cross.  He's our perfect and complete substitute in every way, shape, and form, from His conception to His resurrection.  Jesus came to do what He did, not just because we're unable to work perfection in our lives, but so we will never have to go through what He did.  He was forsaken by God so that we'll never have to experience that hell.  He suffered all our sins so that we'll never have to pay that wretched, unbearable price.  All this He did for us because of His great unconditional love for us and His unwavering, perfect love and obedience for His Heavenly Father, who willingly and unconditionally gave His only-begotten Son to die for us so that we could have everlasting life and salvation with Him.

Now, as we live this week I want you to also think about the end of this text; **"And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time**."  The devil didn't simply quit after Jesus had bested him that one time in the wilderness.  The devil never quits!  In fact, Satan came right back at Jesus with the very same two-letter temptation three years later when Christ was hanging on His cross.  **"If you are the Son of God save yourself!  Prove it!  Come down off your cross!"** Talk about a more opportune time!  What's more opportune than being at the very end of your rope, completely forsaken and forgotten by everyone you love, including God Himself?!  "Okay, if you really are the Son of God put that almighty power to good use and end all of this nonsense.  Save yourself, come down off that cross and let these losers get what they deserve."  And that's just it: If Christ would've given in and come down off that cross we would be finished.  But that's not how it worked out.  Christ Jesus didn't give in.  "It is finished" was spoken in victory by the Son of God on His cross as the plan of our salvation was fulfilled.

All too often we fall prey to the devil's temptations when things really heat up in life and get difficult.  We can stand firm and resist once, maybe twice, when the temptations are relatively small and easy, but when life really hits the fan it’s almost as if the rules change for us.  We begin to falsely reason that extenuating circumstances call for extenuating measures.  "Normally this would be wrong and I wouldn't do it, but things are different here.  This is a matter of life and death!  It'll be okay this time.  God will understand."  Believe me: The devil is no dummy!  He didn't stop working on Jesus.  He didn't even bother to use different temptations.  He used the same old temptation.  He just waited for a more opportune time to strike; a time when that temptation would have more influence and leverage and power.  If this was the case with Jesus, what makes you think the devil is going to stop working on you simply because you overcame his temptations once before?

My brothers and sisters in Christ, it doesn't matter how or when the devil tempts you.  The answer is always the same: look to and hold fast to your Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus.  Don't look to Him as a poster-boy model of what you need to do.  Nothing makes the devil happier than getting you to foolishly believe that different circumstances call for different measures and that you can actually assist in working your salvation and deliverance.  Instead look to and hold fast to your perfect and complete substitute who did it all, perfectly and completely, for you.  Hold fast to Son of God and His victorious and eternal proclamation, **"It is finished!"**

In Christ, all of God's promises of deliverance, life, forgiveness, and salvation are ours.  "Resist the devil," yes, but not with your own reason or strength.  Resist the devil by simply holding fast to and holding up Christ alone!  For it is in Christ alone, our perfect and complete substitute, that the head of the devil has already been crushed, making us no longer enemies of God, but cherished and redeemed children of our Father; our Father who was willing to ransom His one and only Son, making us what we are today—His forgiven and redeemed children of promise—no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Amen