

“Going Inside”

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Every Lent begins with the temptation of Jesus in the desert. It is a famous passage, and even inspired John Milton’s poem “Paradise Regained,” which we will see performed here in a few weeks’ time. The setting is simple: Jesus has been baptized, and now the Spirit has led him into the desert for forty days. This period of fasting is what inspires the 40 days of Lent. But as important as this time in the desert is, the encounter with Satan feels rather anticlimactic.

Perhaps it’s because Jesus responds to all of Satan’s temptations by quoting scripture, which is not very exciting. These temptations don’t seem to make Jesus even break into a sweat. Should I eat? Should I become a king? Jesus seems unshakeable, and to us readers, it seems like the end of this whole encounter is a foregone conclusion. Of course Jesus isn’t going to be tempted. He’s God in human form. How could he be tempted?

The fact is, no one in the Bible ever seems to wrestle with temptation. People do bad things all the time - they cheat on their spouses, they kill people, they steal. But there are no speeches in the Bible where anyone frets over two courses of action. Should I or shouldn’t I?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, there are lots of people who face difficult decisions, temptations to have sex or kill, but they don’t seem to struggle with these situations.

Bathsheba ON THE ROOF

For example, one day King David is in his palace when he sees a beautiful woman bathing naked on a nearby roof (2 Samuel 11:2-5). He asks who she is, and is told her name is Bathsheba, and she is married. So, sleeping with her would be adultery, and since he’s the king, she may not feel like she has any choice. But in the Biblical text, David doesn’t wrestle with any of that. He just orders his men to bring her over, and he sleeps with her. He sees, he acts. No inner struggle at all.

When Abraham is told by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, he doesn’t wait or struggle with it, he just says yes and gets moving (Genesis 22). He has waited years to have this son, who is to be the father of nations - how can he just say “yes God” and resolve to kill him? Why isn’t he tempted to delay, or to argue with God? Biblical figures don’t seem to struggle with temptation the way we would expect.

In The New Testament, some of the letters do talk about temptation. In the letter by James, he says this to his fellow Christians:

13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. (James 1:13-14)

But later in the same letter, James says this:

7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (James 4:7)

In Peter's letters it is the same. When we would expect someone to be wrestling with inner desires that tempt one to break a rule or to sin, Peter says this temptation comes from outside, from the devil:

8 Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. (1 Peter 5: 8-9)

The people who wrote the New Testament thought that most of the desires which might cause us to sin were created or encouraged by the devil. He was the great enemy, the one who causes people to fall away from God. The early Christians who wrote the New Testament rarely show anyone wrestling with internal temptation. For them, temptation was something that comes from outside.

This is part of why we don't find Christ's temptation in the desert very dramatic. All of us wrestle with temptation all the time. But, we don't blame it on the devil trying to lead us astray. If we are having trouble resisting the desire to break a diet or cheat on our taxes, that struggle is taking place only in our heads and hearts.

So how can we understand this difference of experience about temptation? Are we simply right and they were superstitious cretins who believed in fantasies like the Devil?

It isn't that simple.

Back in the 20th century, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S Lewis were academics at Oxford University. They became famous writing books which have become famous movies like the Lord of the Rings and the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. One their close friends was a man called Owen Barfield.

Owen Barfield Poster

He wrote some amazing books which will never get made into movies. He studied the history of words. He showed that words evolve over time, and they reveal how the way we experience the world has changed.

Barfield argued that in ancient times, people assumed that all the major forces in life were external. If a person in ancient Rome wanted to write a story they relied on a Muse to inspire them. The ideas came from the outside. When people fell in love, they blamed the gods who sent Cupid with his arrows to cause a person to fall in love with someone else. Love did not come from inside, it came from outside a person, whether you wanted it or not.

Barfield said you could see this process in how words were used. When we speak of a person's character, we talk about whether they are jovial, or sad, optimistic or fearful, brave or cowardly. These are all elements of a person's character. But before the 1600s, the word "character" had a different meaning.

Wax seal

It meant a symbol that was pressed onto the body, like in a tattoo, or on a wax seal, when sending a letter. For a very long time, a character was something that was pressed into something else from the outside.

Only later did it become something a person expressed from the inside.

One of the best examples for this shift can be found in Shakespeare's plays. He is famous for characters who step aside and share their thoughts with the audience. Take the play Hamlet, which was written around the year 1600. It contains that famous "to be or not to be" speech. Hamlet is wrestling with the temptation of killing himself. But unlike in earlier centuries, this temptation is all happening inside his head. He doesn't blame any god or spirit. It's all psychological.

Owen Barfield argued that we are all Hamlet now. Every day we wrestle with conflicting feelings and desires. We are all subject to temptation, but we don't blame God or the devil for it. It's all internal. That's a big shift from the ancient world's psychic state. That's why today's story of temptation of Jesus by Satan strikes us as weird. We all feel temptation, but I doubt any of us have seen a demon standing in front of us. The nature of temptation has changed because we have changed.

But I think this scripture passage is still useful. Let's try something. Instead of assuming that the devil is a real person standing next to Jesus, what if he is a force within Jesus? What if this story is really about an internal struggle Jesus was experiencing between his conscience and his desires? What if this is all in his head?

This may help us understand why Jesus is facing these three specific temptations. The first one is easy. Jesus hasn't eaten in weeks, of course he's hungry. He will be tempted to eat by his stomach if nothing else. But why does he resist? Well, think about who Jesus is in the Bible. He has the power to work miracles. What if he came out of the desert selfish and self-serving? What if he gave into his own physical desires, and did miracles for himself first before anyone else? Is that the kind of Messiah the world needs? What if he took the first bite when he multiplied the loaves and fishes? You can see the problem. Leaders need to put other people first, and their own desires last. The world can get pretty messed up if they put themselves first.

That same idea applies to the other two temptations. Jesus imagines being tempted to jump off the top of the temple, so angels could catch him. Why would Jesus imagine this? Jesus is the son of God. But he won't boast about it. You may recall that last week, we heard about Jesus being on the top of a mountain, shining like the sun, next to Moses and Elijah. But he only showed this divinity to three disciples, not the crowd. And he swore the disciples to secrecy. Jesus knows he is from God, but to be God-like, he will need to be humble, to resist the temptation to show off his divinity. He needs to control his ego's urge to show off his special relationship to God.

The last temptation is about power. Jesus imagines being offered all the kingdoms of the world to rule, to become a new Caesar. To have armies at his disposal, to have everyone obey him out of fear as other leaders do. Why would Jesus imagine this temptation? He knows he is supposed to be a Messiah, a leader of the Jews, their liberator from the Romans. But leadership is a dangerous thing. It matters whether you are respected or feared. It matters whether people are inspired by you, or obey because they fear violent retribution. Jesus has to decide whether he wants to be a leader for himself or for others. Does he want to lead as emperors do, where the people have no choice, or lead those who choose to follow? It is the difference between leading by force or leading by choice. So Jesus imagines a temptation to lead as all world leaders do - but if he accepts it, he will be serving not God, but Satan. Not God, but his selfish ego.

If any of us were in the desert that day, our temptations might be different. A bus driver may be tempted to drive too fast, to ignore certain people on the side of the road. An accountant may be tempted to steal money or falsify the books. We all have our temptations. Each of them is different. One size does not fit all.

But we should note how Jesus resists temptation. He doesn't present arguments about why he should resist, what makes sense to him, his inner reasoning. Instead, he quotes scripture. To our modern ears that doesn't sound very compelling. But consider this, all we who live inside our heads. When we get into situations where we are tempted to do something very wrong, the voice of our conscience has been drowned out. Whatever good sense we had has been overruled by the desires that are leading us to break a law, sleep with the wrong person, break a promise. When we are ready to act in an inappropriate way, our inner voice of reason has already lost the battle.

In that situation, we need to be reminded that there are external rules and values that we didn't invent. That we didn't write. That a higher power wrote and expects us to obey. Sometimes, we need a reminder that there are forces bigger than ourselves that can say no. Sometimes, that is the only reason we'll stop ourselves, straining against the desire to act on our own impulses.

Even in our age of inner dialogues and personal morality, in an age when each person has the right to make up their own moral code. When faced with temptation, it still matters that there are external rules and morals we are expected to follow. Sometimes, that reminder is the last defence against doing harm.

And so, we have inherited this story. Of Jesus in the desert, confronted by Satan, standing outside of him. This may not be how we expect to be tempted, by a demon next to us. But let us remember what saves Jesus - his reference to God's external existence. To the force bigger than ourselves which created us, and offers us wisdom so we can be good to ourselves and others. Even when we are tempted not to be. That is indeed a blessing. Amen.