

FIGHTING THE DEVIL WITH SCRIPTURE

Matthew 4:1-11

In Hebrews 4:14-16 we read:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested (or tempted) as we are yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Jesus was tried or tempted in every way as we are. We may have to take that on faith. Because the temptations Jesus faces in the wilderness aren't like anything I've ever been tempted with. They were unique temptations to Jesus as the Son of the living God.

So maybe we do have to take it on faith that Jesus was tempted to lie, to cheat, to gossip, to say something mean, to be selfish, to be lazy, to eat and drink too much, to indulge a vice, to anger and envy and pride... just like you and I are. I do take that on faith because Jesus was fully human, just like you and me, **yet without sin.**

Each time we see Jesus is tempted by the devil in today's Gospel he quotes a scripture passage in response. 1) The devil tempts him to turn stones into bread. Jesus quotes scripture to say that *One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.* Jesus 1 the Devil 0. 2) The devil tempts Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, quoting scripture himself. Jesus quotes scripture back at him: *Again it is written, do not put the Lord your God to the test.* Jesus 2, the Devil 0. The devil tempts Jesus to claim all the kingdoms of the world if he will but worship the Devil. Jesus replies, *Away with you, Satan! For it is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.* Jesus 3, the Devil 0 – game set match.

It looks easy – all you need is the right scripture quotation and the Devil flees from you. Maybe if we had a list of each kind of trial and temptation we might face and a scripture passage that addressed it we could live well. Such a list might be helpful, but I think we all know that it is not so easy. The Bible is not a set of magical incantations. It's not about having the right words of knowledge and power. **It's about having the right heart.** What was Jesus doing in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights? Praying, fasting, meditating on the scriptures. He was in the right frame of mind and heart to resist those unique temptations. Ever since he was a child Jesus had been studying the scriptures. They were part of him. They were internalized. He knew the story and his part in it. It was out of that deep knowledge and faith and prayer life that Jesus quoted the scriptures and defeated the devil. *“The power of Scripture lies not in the words on a page. That's just ink. We can't expect to use the Bible as some sort of garlic to ward off Dracula. Rather, the power resides in the person for whom the written word has become a living, breathing thing.”* (Homiletics, Feb. 2005, pgs. 58-59)

So, how can we use the Scriptures to help us in times of trial and temptation? I'd like to suggest 6 strategies.

(1) The first strategy is to not only *read* the scriptures but also to *mark, learn and inwardly digest them*. At the onset of his call to be a Prophet Ezekiel had a vision in which he was handed a scroll with Scripture on it and told to eat it. He did and it tasted as honey on his lips. A book I'm reading by Eugene Peterson is entitled *Eat This Book*. It's about the Bible. Peterson's illustration is that of a dog gnawing a bone. So he says we should read the scriptures. Returning to it again and again, gnawing on it, trying to get every morsel of marrow out of it.

The more we read and study and chew on the Bible, the more it becomes our Book, the more we are personally shaped by it, the more we internalize it's words and meaning. That means reading it – all of it. There are many plans for reading the Bible. Some people start at Genesis and work through Revelation. Many people use the 2-year cycle of readings in the daily lectionary and followed in *Forward Day by Day*. There are many other formats – any of them are excellent. Just do it! It is also good to study the Scriptures. One wonderful way is to join a Bible study group and study with others. You can also study on your own. You can do both. The Bible will be most helpful to you the more you read and study and wrestle with it.

(2) The second strategy is to recognize the basic narrative story contained in the Bible, even if you cannot always quote chapter and verse. I'm sure you know the basic elements of the story. Does God hate the world or anyone whom he has made? No! The Bible is a love story of God seeking after the lost. The Genesis story we read today tells how we were each lost in a fall long, long ago. But God has never ceased to work to try and reclaim us for his own. After many attempts to reach out God ultimately decided to send his Jesus his Son to redeem the world at the cost of his own life. And so God's Son died for us upon a cross to bring us back to God. His death and resurrection give us power to live in the fullness of God's love.

We need to see our place in that narrative. We are sinners in need of God's redemption. God loves us and calls us to be his own.

We hear the narrative in the Church Year, in the yearly cycle of Scripture readings and we hear it in miniature each time we gather around the Lord's Table to celebrate Holy Communion. Reflecting on our place in God's narrative will help us seek forgiveness and live more fully into the love and servanthood we are called to in Jesus.

(3) A third strategy is to focus on your favorite Bible passages. Revisit your favorite passages often. Get to know them like an old friend. Let them settle deep into your soul. Let me tell you a couple of my favorite scripture passages:

- Isaiah 40:28-31 *Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and*

strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord to renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

- Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus said *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

I could pick out some others. But what are your favorite scripture passages? What piece of good news in those favorite passages warms your heart and assures you of God's love? The strategy is to go back often to your favorite passages and let them draw you deeper into God's love.

(4) My 4th Strategy is to memorize scripture verses. Many people have memorized the 23rd Psalm and it is a great comfort to them; as is the Lord's Prayer. When a piece of scripture is committed to memory you always have it available. It is especially helpful in difficult and painful circumstances to have scripture verses that you can rely on. Presidential candidate John McCain, when he was a prisoner of war in North Vietnam became the chaplain of the group of prisoners facing terrible deprivation and torture. The reason for that role was because at an Episcopal High School he had assimilated and memorized some parts of the liturgy and simple scriptures and those simple phrases were immensely comforting to him and his fellow prisoners in the midst of captivity.

Columnist Andy Crouch tells the story of a girl names Elizabeth who grew up in a Christian home in Southeast Asia. When she was 16 a relative in her village said she could find a well-paying job in a neighboring country. Anxious to help her family and earn money for college, Elizabeth went with this relative – and ended up being forced into prostitution. Elizabeth was confined to a brothel, and was held there against her will for 7 months, repeatedly raped by customer after customer. It was an excruciating existence, but Elizabeth was sustained by her Christian faith. In fact, she wrote on the wall of her room a number of Scripture passages, including Psalm 27, *“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”* A group called *International Justice Mission* rescued her. When they freed her from the brothel, the truth of Psalm 27 became clear to all who saw the Scriptures on her wall: *“When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh,”* says verse 2, *“they shall stumble and fall.”* (Crouch, Andy. “The cruel edges of the world.” *Christianity Today*, June 2004, 60.) One would wish that scripture could save people from such demeaning and horrible trials. They don't, but they can help sustain us in the midst of them.

(5) My 5th strategy is to *pray through the scriptures*. Fully 80% of the Book of Common Prayer is composed of Scripture passages. The words and images are full of Biblical faith. When we say these beautiful words in worship we are praying through the Bible. The Psalms are another great source of prayer. The raw human emotion and energy of

the Psalms have been the prayer book of God's people ever since King David. As we pray these beautiful words let them seep into our souls and direct our paths.

(6) My 6th and last strategy is to *hang on!* When you're troubled and your heart and your mind are wrestling with each other; when you wake up in a cold sweat at 2 a.m. and can't get back to sleep; when you are deeply troubled and anxious, ***hang on*** to some thread of faith. It may be as simple as *Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so*. It may be the image of Christ upon the cross. It may be a favorite scripture passage, or even a word of hope. But *hang on* to your hope and don't let it go. Claim the promise! Hang on for dear life and don't let go.

Scripture helped Jesus to fight off the Devil and win. Scripture can help us through our times of trial and temptation.

- Read and study it.
- Recognize the narrative flow of the Christian story and your place in that story.
- Develop some favorite passages and reflect on them.
- Memorize scripture verses
- Pray through the scriptures
- When you're in the midst of a personal crisis, *hold on* and don't let go.

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer, Collect for the Sunday closest to Nov. 16, p. 236)