

**SIN CROUCHING AT THE DOOR  
OVERCOMING TEMPTATION**

Genesis 4:7, Luke 4:1-12, Hebrews 4:14-16

I don't know about you but I have some difficulty identifying with Jesus in the wilderness. Frankly I don't have to go out into the wilderness to find temptation. It seems more like temptation finds me. Temptation is present every time I log into the internet, every time I'm feeling annoyed or impatient, every time I can choose one thing or a different thing. As a matter of fact there aren't many times when I'm not faced with temptations to do the wrong or the self indulgent thing verses the right thing. I'm glad that Jesus was able to resist temptation.... Able to tell the devil where to get off.... Able to see more clearly who he was and what he was called to do. It is good news that Jesus resisted the devil and remained sinless. But I am a sinner. I know what it is not only to be tempted but also to succumb to temptation. My predicament is different. So I don't identify particularly with the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

I identify more with Tiger Woods than with Jesus. There are things I have done of which I am ashamed. I don't like it but I have had to apologize and say that I was sorry that things I had done or said had hurt others. It was my fault. I blew it. Whether or not Tiger's very public confession on Friday was sincere, on a much smaller scale and on a smaller stage most of us have had at one point or another had to confess our mistakes and failures.

If I were to choose someone in the Bible I identify with in relation to temptation, it would be Adam and Eve and their son Cain. Adam and Eve were tempted to eat the fruit of the one tree that God forbade them to eat, the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Genesis 3 tells the story about the first sin against God. Genesis 4 tells the story of the first sin against one's brother.

Cain and Abel were Adam and Eve's boys. Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a farmer. One day they both made an offering to God. For some inexplicable reason God looked with favor on Abel's offering of a sheep from his flock but not on Cain's grain offering. Cain was angry, so angry that he killed his brother. God confronted Cain. As Cain's punishment God sent him out as a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, but to protect him God put a mark on Cain warning anyone who might kill him that they would suffer a seven-fold vengeance.

The results of these sins were devastating. Adam and Eve (Cain too) would no longer live in the presence of God. They were sent out of the garden. They were **alienated** from God, from one another, from their original vocation (to care for the garden, to till the soil), from other people in society, and from their own true selves.

In Genesis 4:6-7 God confronted Cain in his anger.

*The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”*

That is an image of temptation I can relate to, the picture of sin as a wild beast crouching at the door ready to pounce on us! Sin is far more than an evil action. Sin takes on a life of its own. Sin lusts after Cain with an animal hunger. Sin is lethal. God’s human creatures must be on guard for themselves. There is danger to the life of Cain in how he handles his rage and depression.

Here is one of the 7 deadly sins – anger. The other six – pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony and sloth – are no less crouching at the door ready to spring and master us. Surely Cain put himself in perfect position for sin to pounce on him. But is that not the very nature of temptation, allowing ourselves to be in a position to be tempted? Sin is crouching, waiting for the opportunity to master us. And when it does there will be devastating results.

Think of how that is so often true. Addiction is the obvious example. Addiction is not a sin; it’s a disease. Lots of people gamble. Lots of people drink. Lots of people take drugs. Not all become addicted. But is not addiction a perfect example of the sin crouching at the door overwhelming someone and mastering them?

There are many ways sin can overwhelm and master us. ...The innocent flirtation that leads to an adulterous affair. ...The habit of petty theft that becomes embezzlement when opportunity and need intersect. ...The innocent and convenient lies that become a pattern of deceit. ...The nurturing of a resentment, feeding the flame of petty dislikes until a relationship is severed and broken. ...Letting little seemingly unimportant things slip until one is overwhelmingly behind in one’s work or one’s life.

Sin is always crouching at the door waiting to pounce on us. Its desire is for us. It wants to overwhelm us and take away our will. Sin is always there waiting for an opportunity to destroy us if we let it.

A surprisingly perceptive reflection on this biblical passage is found in John Steinbeck’s classic story, *East of Eden*. Steinbeck is fascinated at the different ways the passage is translated:

*Do you remember when you read us the 16 verses of the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis and we argued about them? (Lee asked his old friend Samuel) Well the story bit deeply into me and I went into it word for word. The more I thought about the story, the more profound it became to me. Then I compared the translations we have – the King James Version says this – it is when Jehovah has asked Cain why*

*he is angry. Jehovah says, "If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? And if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and **thou shalt** rule over him." It was that "thou shalt" that struck me, because it was a promise that Cain would conquer sin. Then I got a copy of the American Standard Bible. It was very new then. And it was different in this passage. It says, "Do thou rule over him." Now this is very different. This is not a promise; it is an order. And I began to stew about it. I wondered what the original word of the original writer had been that these very different translations could be made. (After a long exploration Lee finds the word he is looking for and it's meaning. The Hebrew word is *Timshel*. Translated literally it means **thou mayest**, *thou mayest rule over sin*.)*

Lee goes on to say: **Thou mayest!** *"Why, that makes a man great, that gives him stature with the gods, for in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he has still the great choice. He can choose his course and fight it through and win." Lee's voice was a chant of triumph*

Aah, but we have a choice. We are not helpless in the face of sin. Sin may be lurking, hungering for us with an animal hunger but we may master it. We always have a choice.

But all too often we have made the wrong choice. And the more we do make the wrong choice the less we have any choice to make at all. The very nature of the sickness that is Sin is to sap our will.

While we may not identify with Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, it's far more important to know that in Jesus' temptation God identifies with us. In sharing human life, human struggle, human temptation God identifies with us in our struggle and our predicament. In Hebrews 4:14-16 the author explains why Jesus is able to plead our case before the Father:

*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 weakness, but we have one who in every respected 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.*

We always have a choice – *timshel* (*thou mayest*) – about what we do and whether or not we are able to triumph and master that sin which crouches at our door. But thanks be to God in Christ Jesus, we also have grace! We have forgiveness. We have the grace and the power of the Holy Spirit to cry out for help when we've chosen wrongly and been overcome and mauled by that beast crouching at our door. Jesus takes our part. By God's help and power we can triumph ...even over addiction, even over terrible failures,

even over alienation and bitterness, even over our inability to forgive, even over the worst things we've ever done. Jesus takes our part. The Holy Spirit can empower us. We can cry out for help and we can be helped. Tiger Woods has a great high priest he can turn to. We have a great high priest we can turn to.

Temptation is always present and available. When we've come to that point where sin has overwhelmed us and we realize that we no longer have any power or ability to help ourselves, our God is there for us. We have a high priest in the heavens who has been tested as we are tested and Jesus passed the test. He is there to help us. In Jesus we truly **may** triumph over the sin that lurks at the doorway and we **may** lead abundant lives.

Amen.