

Who resists temptation?

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[0 : 0 0] Who resists temptation? Well, at the risk of sounding like an old man before my time, can! you believe that this is the first Sunday in February already? January is now done and dusted! And I wonder how many of us here today in church and at home online would like to admit to having made a new year resolution. Or he may have even made more than one. Now I'm not asking you to share the gory details of your own resolution, unless you want to of course, but what I'd like you to share and I know you're all going to be completely honest here is, have you managed to keep your resolution? Well done for those of you that have, but you can be proud of yourselves, but for those that haven't, you're in good company.

Because my own resolution took out cakes and biscuits and it didn't even last a day, let alone a whole month and I'm being honest. And you can all rest easy. I'm not going to give you some fire and brimstone sermon this morning, giving everyone a hard time about not keeping the resolutions. No.

What I'd like for us all to think about is what exactly actually happens when we resolve to do something. Once we make a resolution, and it doesn't matter what that resolution relates to, it seems that almost right away, the strength of that resolution is tested. And we're tempted to pack it in and revert back to our old ways. Now for me the temptation was getting offered some sticky toffee pudding as dessert for our New Year's Day dinner. And I gave in without any fight at all. It's this relationship between testing and tempting which lies at the very heart of our Gospel reading today. In fact, it's embedded in the word itself. The Greek word, periazō, is one which can be translated as either tempting or testing. They're so closely related that you can really just take your pick.

Matthew tells us that no sooner had Jesus stepped into the waters of the Jordan and committed himself to fulfilling God's plan for his life, than he was being tested and tempted to do just the opposite and cast aside his resolve. In our reading, we see both meanings being applied at different levels in the story.

[2 : 5 1] God tests. The devil tempts. You might well ask, how is it that God tests? Well, we should remember that it's God's Spirit, the same Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism, that actually drives Jesus into the wilderness. We sometimes forget this in our haste to read about how Jesus was tempted by the devil. God was testing his newly appointed and empowered son, just as he had previously tested Abraham at Mount Moriah, when he commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and when he had tested the people of Israel in the wilderness.

So let's explore the relationship between testing and temptation and ask ourselves, what can we expect to happen when we are tempted and our faith is put to the test?

Matthew's text begins chapter 4 verse 1. Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The story has fallen right on the heels of Jesus' baptism.

And many would say that this is exactly at that point, the baptism of Jesus, that he's being first recognized as the Christ. It was there, standing in the waters of the Jordan, that Jesus was confirmed by God as the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world. In chapter 3 verse 17, And behold, a voice from heaven said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

And whilst we don't really know what was going on through Jesus' mind right then, we're told that he came up out of the river and he went off into the wilderness by himself.

[4 : 5 5] And there he fasted and prayed for 40 days and 40 nights. And it was there, in that challenging environment of the wilderness, that the seriousness of his calling was about to be tested.

So, what can you and I come to expect when our faith and our resolve to keep our faith is tested? Well, firstly, we can expect to be tempted.

According to Matthew, we read that Jesus was first tempted to turn the stones into bread. And why not? He must have been hungry after all. And anybody would have been living out in the wilderness, and especially for that length of time.

He was being tempted to protect himself, to seek worldly power. Satan says to him in verse 9, All these I will give you if you fall down and worship me.

Jesus was being tempted to use his divine power to serve himself, rather than to empty himself into the service of others, as God would have him do. Now, I think you might agree that there are times in our own lives, when it can be tempting to believe that as long as we maintain a low profile, and go along with the crowd, then nobody is likely to bother us much.

[6 : 18] But woe betide if we happen to speak up, or begin to question the status quo, maybe even champion a cause. Because then, we know that we are on the very real risk of being challenged, and criticised, and called to task.

And not only by our adversaries, as often as not, as by our friends. The quickest way to meet the devil, is to take a stand for God.

Once you commit yourself to a task, or a discipline, or a new way of life, temptation is not going to be far behind. It's like making a New Year's resolution.

No sooner than you resolve, like I did, to cut out the cakes and the biscuits, then the sweet smell, the tempting smell, of sticky toffee pudding, comes wafting through for the kitchen.

And please tell me, how was I supposed to say no to that? What makes the temptations of Jesus so important, is that what was at stake here, was the temptation to abandon God's claim on his life, and follow the ways of the world instead.

[7 : 33] The story of testing and temptation shows how the Son of God will exercise his calling, exercise his power only in obedience to God's own purpose and plans.

This temptation of Jesus is therefore an example, paradigm, for the temptations we are all likely to experience in our own lives.

And the good news is that if Jesus can do it, then so can we. Think about that. If Jesus can do it, so can we.

As Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 10, verse 13, No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.

God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted by your ability. But with the temptation, he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

[8 : 39] When your faith is tested, you can expect to be tempted. You can also expect to be strengthened. So in this sense, testing is a good thing.

It gives you a chance to flex your muscles and show your stuff. If it's a test in college or university, it gives you a chance to confirm what you've learned in all those hours of studying that you've put in. If it's out in the golf course, it gives you a chance to prove your sporting skills. Even when it's those occasions when it might bring out your shortcomings, or reveal your inadequacies, testing can still be a good thing.

Because it lets you know where you need to make an improvement. If you can't pass the exam at Specsavers, then I'm afraid to say, it's maybe time you've got glasses.

Testing lets us show where we stand. So it's a good thing that we're tested from time to time.

Testing builds self-confidence. It's the secret to lasting faith.

[9 : 49] Only as our convictions, our values and our beliefs are tested, can we then truly know ourselves to be men and women of integrity and principle.

Only as we're tested can we truly know ourselves to be children of God. Paul told the Romans in Romans chapter 5, verses 3 to 5, we also rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character.

And character produces hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Testing proves the metal of our faith and character. It helps to confirm the integrity of our beliefs and our values. It builds self-confidence and a greater strength of resolve.

When faith is tested, you can expect to be strengthened. You can also expect God to be with you.

And now reading Jesus tells Satan, in verse 4, it is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by

every word that comes from the mouth of God.

[11:12] And in verse 7, again it is written, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test. And finally, in verse 10, be gone Satan, for it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.

When faith is tested, God's written word becomes a living word of inspiration and strength. How many times have you found yourself recalling a verse or two of scripture in the face of a personal crisis?

A loved one dies, and the words can often flow without effort. Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd that I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

[12:28] You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me. All the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Or at those times when we're feeling alone and vulnerable, facing a challenge that we think might be overwhelming. It's then from Mark, chapter 6, verse 50, that we hear Jesus say, as he said to the disciples in the face of a storm, take heart, it is I.

Do not be afraid. Or, like many people just now, you're worried about how you're going to pay the bills this month. Or how you're going to get all your work done.

Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. That's when you can remember the words from Philippians. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.

We feel the peace of God's presence and the power of God's Spirit more so in a moment of crisis than at any other time.

[13:49] Every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we pray not to be tested. Do not lead us into temptation. And yet, we know fine that there's going to be times when we will be put to the test.

And we'll then have to try and stand strong in our faith. When that time comes, remember this.

When your faith is tested, you can expect to be tested and tempted.

You can expect to be strengthened. You can expect God to be with you. As God told Paul in the moment of his trial, so he says to us, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow.