

Temptation: Hills and Obstacles

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[0 : 00] from Matthew chapter 16. I want to focus particularly on verse 23, that he, that is Jesus, turned and said to Peter, get behind me Satan, you are a hindrance to me, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

So I mentioned last week that I've taken up running over the last few months, and my time here on the island has given me a good opportunity for a change of scenery while I run.

I've mostly been running around the castle grounds, and I am really enjoying the scenery. The grounds are great, and the views, well, I would say they take your breath away, but I don't usually have an awful lot of breath left by the time I get that far.

I'll tell you what I'm not enjoying, though. Hills. My runs at home are usually fairly flat. That is definitely not the case over here.

I'm pretty sure it's actually impossible for a loop to be uphill all the way around, but that is what it feels like some days. Now, that's another time I'm tempted to give up my run.

[1 : 18] We looked last week at giving up before you've even got started, but another time I'm tempted to give up my run is when it's well underway, but I hit hills or rough patches or bad weather or obstacles.

When any kind of obstacle gets in the way, it's very tempting just to give it up and call it a day. And again, obstacles can be something that put us off when we're running the race of the Christian life.

This is part two of our wee mini-series, looking at key moments of temptation in Jesus's life and how they can help us to deal with the temptations that come our way.

So I want to consider this passage that we've read in Matthew's Gospel, and I want to think about it under three headings. The first is running up that hill. And then I want to think about friend or foe.

And then finally, I want to encourage us to run on. So, running up that hill. This passage marks something of a pivotal point, a turning point in Jesus's ministry.

[2 : 28] In Luke's account of this event, which we find in chapter 9 of his Gospel, towards the end of that chapter, we're told that Jesus, knowing his time was close, set his face towards Jerusalem.

Now, in that respect, he would literally be going uphill, up to Jerusalem. But I'm thinking more in terms of metaphorically facing an uphill run, full of obstacles and challenges.

Very often, the Christian life can be like that. The devil throws obstacles, he throws difficulties in our way, in the hope that they will prove too daunting or too difficult for us, and that we'll give up.

And it was no different for Jesus. The devil tried the same tactic. When we read the account of Jesus's wilderness temptation in Matthew chapter 4 last week, at the end, we're told that having failed, the devil left him.

But Luke's account of that temptation adds an ominous note, because what it says is the devil left him until an opportune time. And this, this is that time.

[3 : 38] So as Jesus begins to make clear to his disciples his purpose on earth, as he begins to be acknowledged as Messiah, as Christ, the chosen one, as he shows that his mission will encompass and bring blessing to the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, as he moves into position to begin his end game, so the devil steps up his attempts to put a stop to this once and for all.

Now, the devil is largely indifferent to those who are indifferent to God. He mostly contents himself with keeping them entertained and distracted.

But those who are following or considering following the Lord, well, you can expect him to provide obstacles and opposition.

And the obstacles the tempter throws at us can take various forms, all kinds of different forms. But the one that he deploys against Jesus here is a favorite of his, and it's particularly insidious and hurtful and harmful.

Which brings us to our second point. Friend or foe? Friend or foe? Now, if we'd read the beginning of this chapter, we'd have seen the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to Jesus to ask him for a sign.

[5 : 11] And verse one of the chapter makes it clear that this request wasn't sincere. They were looking to test him. And that word, test, in Greek, it can also mean entrap or snare.

And it's the same one that was used in last week's passage in Matthew 4, where the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness. It's a trap, it's a snare, it's an obstacle.

Now, in some ways, that attack, that test is hardly unexpected. Because it comes from those who are being progressively revealed as being Jesus's enemies, as seeking to oppose him.

But in the passage that we read, the temptation, the attack, comes from a much more shocking source.

Because it comes from Peter. From Jesus's friend. His disciple. And not just any disciple.

[6 : 18] He was one of the twelve. One of Jesus's closest disciples. And not just that. But along with James and John, Peter is often singled out as one of the closest three.

As one of Jesus's tightest companions. Particularly close to Jesus. Now, sometimes we can see attacks and obstacles coming towards us.

Because they come from places and people that we'd expect to oppose God's ways. Because sometimes they catch us by surprise.

When they come from people who we thought were friends. Either because it turns out they were false friends. Who are finally showing their colors.

Or as in this case, because their good intentions carry bad consequences. And the context in which this attack comes makes it even more jarring.

[7 : 27] So I want to take a closer look at this incident. And the passage that we read from. Because in verse 13, Jesus asked his disciples who the people say that he is.

And they give a number of different answers. John the Baptist reborn. Elijah or Jeremiah returned. Or one of the other great Old Testament prophets.

So there's a recognition here that he is someone special. Someone from God. But it's still incomplete. But then Jesus hits them with this follow-up.

The big question. Who do you say I am? That really is the big question, isn't it?

For all of us. For all our friends. And for all our family. It's one Jesus asks each of us. And that one way or the other we have to answer. Who do you say I am?

[8 : 27] Who is Jesus to you? Imagine for a moment the scene here. Here it is.

Who do they say Jesus is? Now I think there would maybe have been a pause here. Maybe just a beat while they considered the full impact of this question.

And then into that speaks Peter. Peter. So often the first to speak. The first to step up.

The first in the water. Oh, Peter. Of all the disciples. The one whose humanity is writ large for us to see. In all its strength and in all its weakness.

Shining through in the text. And here as so often he acts as a spokesperson for the disciples. As he answers. What an answer he gives.

[9 : 23] There in verse 16. If we look at that. Peter answers. You are the Christ. Now that was a seriously loaded term in that place and time. Because Christ is a title.

It's not a name. I'm sure many people get used to the thinking that Jesus Christ. Christ is a surname. But it's not. It's a title. The Greek word for Messiah. The chosen.

The anointed one. The one the Jews had been waiting for for centuries. The one that God had promised. Was going to come from David's line.

A royal leader for God's people. The Christ. You are the Christ. But he doesn't stop there. He also calls Jesus the son of the living God.

That is huge. For monotheistic Jews. The idea that this man could be the son of God.

[10 : 24] In some ways that is even more full of connotations. And even bigger impact than the idea of the Christ. Christ. And the fact that he calls him the son of the living God.

In this place. In Caesarea Philippi. Which is a place which had long been associated with the worship of Baal. And with Pan. And which had been renamed Caesarea Philippi.

To tie it in with the imperial cult of Caesar worship. In this place. This place which is so focused on the worship of false gods. Gods. Peter recognizes Jesus as the son of the living God.

The true God. The only God. And if we were in any doubt as to just how significant that declaration is.

Then look at verse 17. Jesus' response to it. Jesus answered him. Blessed are you Simon bar Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you.

[11 : 30] But my father. Who is in heaven. Now there's a lot in this sentence. By calling him Simon bar Jonah. Simon son of Jonah.

Jesus calls to attention his humanity. He's referencing Peter's earthly father. But then he says that this confession doesn't come through earthly means.

But as a revelation from Jesus' heavenly father. And that is true for us all. It doesn't matter who our people are.

It doesn't matter what our heritage is. It doesn't matter where our background story comes from. For us to understand who Jesus is. To take it in.

To appreciate it really. We need to have him revealed to us. By God. And once that happens. Like Peter.

[12 : 25] We need to speak up. Not sit in silence. To see what someone else is going to say. Because he asks us that question. Who do you say I am?

And then Jesus tells Peter. Tells Simon that he is the rock. Peter. That's what the name means. And on this rock. He will build his church. And he's not talking about building.

Buildings are great. As a utility. But that's not what he's talking about. He's not even talking about an institution. He's talking about the ecclesia. The gathered people.

The assembly of the faithful. What a high point. What an accolade. Peter. You are going to be what I use to build my church. And that makes what comes next.

All the more mind-blowing. Because Jesus follows up from verse 21. By starting to teach his disciples. What being the Messiah.

[13 : 29] The Messiah. The Christ. Really meant. What it entailed. And it wasn't what most people were expecting. We have the benefit of hindsight. But to first century Jews.

The Messiah was supposed to be. A conquering hero. A military king. Who was going to come in. And rid them of the dreaded Roman menace. And what Jesus told them.

It cut hard. Against these expectations. Because from verse 21. He starts to explicitly teach the things that he had hinted at before. That he was going to go to Jerusalem.

That he was going to be rejected. Arrested. And finally. Executed. Before being raised again. Three days later.

Now think. About what that would have sounded like. To his disciples. Jesus had just confirmed to them.

[14 : 29] That he is indeed. The one they had been hoping for. The Messiah. The Christ. Imagine how their hearts must have been racing at that point. What's going to happen now?

And then he tells them. He's going to Jerusalem to die. What? What? You're going to do what?

And again. It's Peter. It's Peter who steps up. And speaks out. What is probably in everybody's minds. Verse 22.

He takes Jesus aside. And we're told he rebukes him. That's pretty strong language. Peter is angry. He is telling Jesus off. He's putting him in his place.

Putting him right. And the irony of the fact that he calls him Lord. While speaking to him in this way. Well that is strong. Far be it from you.

[15 : 32] And the equivalent today would be saying something like. Over my dead body. This is not going to happen. Now in the Greek here.

We have a double negative. We have two different words for no combined. And that is the strongest possible negation. That the Greek language can use. It is the strongest way of saying no.

No way. No how. Not under any circumstances. I will not allow it. Not on my watch. Sometimes.

No. No. Sometimes. The obstacles thrown in our path will take the form of our friends. Sometimes they're false friends. And we're only now finding that out.

But all too often it's our real friends. They mean well and they seek to stop us in our tracks. I don't think that's for you. Why would you want to do that?

[16 : 31] You've got to think of yourself sometimes. Well, what about us? God wouldn't ask you to do that, would he?

Obstacles come in many forms, but this is the saddest and the hardest to deal with. So what do we do about it? Well, what does Jesus do about it?

Which brings us to our final point for this evening. Run on. Now, sometimes what looks like an obstacle from a distance turns out not to be when you get up close.

Maybe that hill isn't as steep as it looks from a distance. Maybe there's a bridge over that river or maybe it turns out the path actually goes round the obstacle you were worried about. But sometimes that's not the case.

And the obstacle really does stand between us and our destination. Now, if that's the case when you're running, there's really only one thing you can do.

[17 : 42] You need to run on. And you need to put the obstacle behind you. And that's exactly what Jesus does here. Read what he says to Peter in verse 23.

Get behind me, Satan. Get behind me. Don't stand in my way. You will not stop me.

Jesus puts this temptation, this obstacle behind him. Look at what he calls Peter. Satan. Which means enemy.

Adversary. Hostile. Now, there are definite echoes of the way Jesus dismisses the tempter back in chapter 4 in the wilderness when he says, Away from me, Satan.

Jesus recognized the real source of this attack. He recognized that in becoming an obstacle, his beloved friend was in reality acting for the enemy.

[18 : 52] Now, that's a hard thing to accept. But sometimes we have to. Peter had gone from being told, This was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven, back in verse 17, to his mind being set not on the things of God, but on the things of men.

He'd gone from being the rock on which the church was going to be built to being a hindrance, literally a stumbling stone. What a turnaround.

And sometimes we have to be prepared to be that blunt, that honest with ourselves and with others. If something or someone is putting us off or standing in the way of us following Jesus, if they have become an obstacle on the path that God has called us to run, we have to recognize them as being used by the enemy.

And we have to put that behind us. Sometimes it will mean reprioritizing. Sometimes it will mean giving up things we enjoy.

Sometimes it may mean disagreements or even lost friendships. Not always, but sometimes it will. And where that is what it takes to get past the obstacle, the stumbling block.

[20 : 18] That's what we have to do. It won't always be forever. I mean, look at Peter. He really did go on to be used powerfully by Jesus in the building of his church.

But here and now, get behind me. Here's an even more sobering thought. Sometimes that friend acting for the enemy might be us.

Are we giving people bad advice? Are we sending out bad signals? Are we putting them off? Are we an obstacle?

Albeit unwittingly and unwillingly. In Matthew 18, verse 17, Jesus warns that temptations will come. And it's the same word that's used here for hindrances.

Temptations will come, but woe to them through whom they come. Romans 14, verse 3, warns us against placing a stumbling block.

[21 : 27] Same word again. In anyone's way. We need to make sure that that is not us. That we are not doing anything.

We are not putting anything in the way of anybody who would follow Jesus. We don't want to find ourselves being told, get behind me, Satan.

Enemy. Adversary. You are an obstacle. We need to make sure that we have our mind set on the things of God, rather than by judging what's best based on human wisdom.

There are so many people out there in need of this gospel. There are so many people who may be walking alongside us, searching for the gospel. We must not be stumbling blocks.

So if there is an obstacle in your path, whatever it might be, if anything at all is threatening to stop you following Jesus, or to divert you from the path that God has set you on, whether you are at the start of that path, or halfway through, or near the end, wherever you are, if there is an obstacle in your way, if there is an obstacle in your way, you need to put it behind you.

[22 : 57] It doesn't matter how the tempter is working to put you off. It doesn't matter if it's through lifestyle, if it's through comfort, if it's through tradition or fear, or if it is through friends.

With God's help, you need to put it behind you, and run on.

There is no other way. If you can't go around the obstacle, you have to go through it, or over it. If you want to continue on the path, and something is in front of you, you need to get it behind you.

If I go out for a run, and I find a hill I don't like the look of, then what am I going to do? Just stop at the bottom of it, and stand there? If you want to get to your destination, if you want to get to where Jesus wants you to be, you need to run on.

Keep going, and with his help, put that obstacle behind you. Don't let anything stop you. Don't let anything get in the way. We need to set our eyes on the prize, and run on.

[24 : 12] Let's bow our heads for a moment. Lord God, we give you thanks for your word, and we pray that you would make it alive to us. We pray that you would speak to us through it.

We thank you for the great privilege we have of being able to read it, being able to read it together, being able to consider it together, and we just pray that you would bless it to us now. We pray that you would help each of us in our run, in our walk with you, and following you.

Lord, we know that the evil one will put obstacles in front of us. Help us to be wise enough to see them, to recognize them for what they are. Help us to know when we can avoid them, and when we can't, when we have to just go on, and put them behind us.

And when that time comes, Lord, give us the strength to do it. Give us the courage to do it, even if it seems hard to us. And Lord, just help us to remember what lies at the end of the road for us, the destination that we are aiming for.

And pray, give us the strength to run on, to run on gladly to that destination. Father, hear our prayer now.

[25 : 18] Forgive our weakness, and strengthen us, we ask. In Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to sing now.