

# Jesus Gets It Right

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## **Genesis 3:1-7**

*In the beginning, the Lord God planted a garden. In that garden, the Lord God placed a man and a woman. In that garden, there was but one restriction. The Lord God said, “You must not eat from the tree that gives knowledge of good and evil.”*

The snake was shrewder than all the animals the Lord God made. And it said to the woman, “Even though God said, ‘You are not to eat from all the trees in the garden — ’” “We eat fruit from the trees in the garden,” the woman said to the snake. “But fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden — God said, ‘You are not to eat any of that and you are not to touch it or you will die.’” And the snake said to the woman, “You’re not going to die! God knows that when you eat any of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil.”

The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom. And she took some of its fruit, and she ate. She also gave some to her man, who was with her, and he ate. And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together, and they made coverings for themselves.

## **Matthew 4:1-11**

*Jesus came to John to be baptized. And when he came up out of the waters of baptism, a voice from heaven said: “This is my Son.” Here’s what happened next.*

Then Jesus was led up into the wilderness by the Spirit to be put to the test by the devil. After he fasted forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tester came and said to him, “If you are the *Son of God*, tell these stones to become bread.” But he answered, “It is written, *Not only by bread does a person live, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*”

Then the devil took him to the holy city, and made him stand on the highest point of the temple. And he said to him, “If you are the *Son of God*, throw yourself down. It is written: *He will give orders to his angels about you, and they will take you in their hands, so you will not smash your foot on a stone.* Jesus said to him, “Again, it is written: *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. And he said to him, “I will give you all these, if you fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! It is written: *Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.*”

Then the devil left him. And suddenly angels appeared and looked after him.

## **Sermon**

Matthew 4 tells the story of Jesus being tested in the wilderness by the devil. That story connects to other biblical stories in many ways. The forty days and forty nights of Jesus’ fast, for example, suggest the forty days and forty nights of rain in the flood story, or the forty days and forty nights that Moses spent on Mt. Sinai, or Israel’s forty years in the wilderness. Jesus’ citations of several biblical texts each suggest a particular story, stories about lessons God was teaching Israel after the exodus from Egypt but before they entered the promised land. And the overall story in Matthew — where Jesus has been anointed as king (by the Holy Spirit, at his baptism), but has not yet come to his throne, and goes out to confront one-on-one and to defeat the great enemy of God’s people — that overall story echoes the story

of David's encounter with Goliath. This morning, however, I want to think about how this story, the story of Jesus being tested in the wilderness by the devil — how this story connects with the story of the man and the woman in the garden.

**The main thing to say about the man and the woman in the garden is: “They got it wrong.”** It was a great set-up the man and the woman had. Their mouths feasted on food fresher and more varied than we've seen in any giant supermarket or in any off-the-beaten-path specialty shop. Their eyes enjoyed a daily visual feast of fish, fowl, and flowers unrivaled by any current collection, whether at the Franklin Park Conservatory, the Columbus Zoo, or anywhere else — including the lush rain forests of Central and South America. Their ears enjoyed an ever-changing chorus: wind and waterfalls, birdsongs and chirps, roars and howls. Set your iTunes to “auto fill” and your iPod to “random play,” and it won't even come close to what they heard. Their fingers likewise enjoyed a feast of sensations, from the cold of flowing water to the warm of sun-baked stones, from the coarse texture of junipers to the inviting smoothness of one another's skin. And their hearts and minds and spirits thrived — thrived on challenging tasks, thrived on their companionship and love, thrived on God's presence with them. It was a great set-up, that garden. No wonder we call it paradise. There, in paradise, the man and the woman were tested; there, in paradise, they failed.

The snake was shrewd, sneaky, seductive. The snake provoked the woman to rise up in defense of God. “God gave us every tree in the garden but one,” she said. Then the snake struck at a weakness in that defense. Surely the woman liked to see things, to touch things, to taste things, to know things, and to draw close to God. Every bit of that was on offer, according to the snake. “Go ahead,” said the snake. “Take it; you'll see!” And the woman, of course, listened to the snake's voice. She fell prey to the shrewd seduction. And her man — here's a surprise: he was with her the whole time — her man was doubly seduced: by the snake and by the woman.

They had everything. They lacked nothing. They were in paradise. Their hearts and their minds and their ears and their hands and their eyes and their bellies were full. And still they were seduced, like contestants on *Deal or No Deal* who just have to try for more. In a place that was all right, they got it all wrong.

**But in the wilderness, Jesus got it right.** In the wilderness, Jesus was anything but full. Long before he reached forty days and forty nights, his belly was empty. His hands had forgotten the weight and the texture of bread. His tongue had forgotten its taste. His lonely spirit ached at the drought of human companionship. It is not good for a man to be alone — not any man, and certainly not this man who one day would know the misery of abandonment. And it didn't take forty days and forty nights for Jesus' mind to begin playing tricks on him. He began hearing voices. The voices plagued him with questions, with doubts, with accusations. “If you are the *Son of God*, tell these stones to become bread . . . If you are the *Son of God*, throw yourself down . . .” How would Jesus resist? How could Jesus resist? He was empty. He was alone.

Did he need to resist? How were the voices testing him? He was hungry and the voice said, “Tell these stones to become bread.” Is that so bad? Wasn't a fast of forty days and forty nights enough? Besides, wouldn't it prove his identity, to himself at least, and erase his doubts, if he could do such a thing? After forty days and forty nights, Jesus may have wondered about God's care. And the voice said, “Throw yourself down; angels will save you.” Is that so bad? It would take away another doubt. And it would be quite a public spectacle. Everyone who saw it would honor Jesus — rightly so, if he were the *Son of God*. After forty days and forty nights, Jesus was exhausted, powerless. And the voice promised him the world. “Just worship me, and it's all yours.”

Robert Linthicum points out that those tests were not necessarily selfish, which is what made them all the more seductive. In the wilderness, there were more than a few stones at Jesus' feet. There were stones everywhere, enough stones to feed the hungry and the poor — were those stones to become bread.

At the temple, the amazed crowd would follow Jesus and be saved — were he to jump and, doing so, tip God's hand. And all the kingdoms . . . under his rule justice would prevail at long last (and it was about time!) — were he just to give the devil his due for a moment.

The test was two-fold, at least. On the one hand, Jesus was being tempted to take a shortcut. Matthew 4 fits on the first Sunday of Lent. It's the beginning of Jesus' activity in the Gospel. It's his first step on the road to Jerusalem (which is where Lent takes us), and there's no turning back. The kingdom will come, justice will roll down, only by way of Jerusalem. No shortcuts. On the other hand, at a more basic level Jesus was being tempted to listen to another voice than God's voice. In the garden, the snake distorted and cast doubt on what God had said. In the wilderness, the devil follows the same strategy. Casting doubt on what Jesus heard God say: "If you are the *Son of God* . . ."; distorting what God had said: "Throw yourself down; Scripture says God will catch you"; ignoring God's voice altogether: "Worship me, not the Lord your God."

How would Jesus resist? How could Jesus resist, empty and alone as he was? He would resist using the one thing he was filled with: the Word of God. "It is written," he would say. "It is written." He knew his people's stories: how they had been tested, how they had failed, and what lessons there were to learn from that. He knew the book of those stories: Holy Scripture — God's Word to Israel, spoken at Sinai and in the wilderness, given through prophet and through king. Over against the voice in his head, there was the voice of God. Over against the devil at his side, there was the God he met face to face in the sacred text. Jesus was filled with the Word of God. The devil didn't stand a chance. Jesus rejected the voice of the devil in favor of the voice of God, the voice he knew well. In the wilderness, empty and alone as he was — in a place that was all wrong, Jesus got it all right.

**Now, what happens with you and with me?** We're in a place that is neither all right nor all wrong. In some ways our address is close to paradise, in the same neighborhood. We are full: filled up with tastes and sensations and experiences, filled up with knowledge and wisdom and trivia, filled up with challenges, with responsibilities, and with rewards. Our address is close to paradise. We're in the suburbs at least. Yet our address borders on the wilderness, too. We are, sometimes, empty and alone, looking for friends without success, filling up on "food, folks, and fun" (as McDonald's used to put it), without even touching the lonely ache in our souls, wanting to know God and to walk with God, but going nowhere with it: no footprints in the sand for us, certainly not God's, not even our own. That's where we live, a stuck-in-the-middle place.

What voices try to seduce us there? How can we defend ourselves against the seduction? Do we want to defend ourselves? Or do we rather enjoy giving in? Lent is a season of penitence. It's a time to own up to the seductions that have a-hold of us. May I tell you what I gave up for Lent?

For thirty-four years, I have been playing the guitar. I knew how to barre a full F-chord long before I knew Jesus. I've not given up the guitar for Lent, but I have given up some things related to it. You see, electric guitars are gadgets. The amplifiers we plug them into are gadgets. And there are lots of gadgets that go in between the guitar and the amplifier. So not only do I play electric guitar, I tinker with it. I fiddle constantly with vacuum tubes (yes, we still use those!), with circuits, with speakers, with stomp boxes, as we call them, and more. There are magazines to read. There are web sites to visit again and again. There are daydreams to have about tweaking and adjusting. There is seduction. Here's *Guitar Player* magazine. Do you know what the motto is, right here on the front cover? "Feed your obsession."

It's all too much. I've been seduced. I've given in in too many ways. A friend in Michigan, who turned into an adversary, said once that I had an idolatry problem. I scoffed then. I still scoff, I suppose. But I'm afraid he's right. How much time, how much attention, how much devotion, how much money my idols demand!

So, here's what I've done for Lent. I've stopped visiting guitar web sites. The bookmarks are gone from my computer. And do you know what? I have more time now, time for better things. I've also put all my amplifiers away but one. I'm not going to be tweaking and fussing with them during Lent. I'll just

be making music. I admit those are small steps. I hope and pray they last beyond Lent. Small steps, but it's a start at least. To abandon the voice that says, "Feed your obsession," and to hear the voice that says, "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only."

I doubt I'll get it all right. But with God's help, I won't get it all wrong either. And in this in-between place where we live, close to paradise but bordering on the wilderness, that's a start, a start in step with Jesus.

I'm sure you have your own seduction story to tell. May God help you to hear his voice above every other voice, this Lent and after.