The Temptation of Christ
Matthew 4:1-11

In the Place of Failure

So chapter 4 begins, v1, 'Then…' Then what? Well, what Matthew has just done is to link what comes next to what's just happened, and what just happened is that Jesus was baptised, the heavens were opened, the Spirit of God came down on him and a voice from heaven said, "This is by beloved Son" (Matt 3:17) *and then,* Matthew says, v1, 'Jesus was led up by the Spirit.' And where does he lead him? 'Into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.'

Now why would God do that? Why would he tell Jesus, and the watching world, that he loves him, that he's his son, and then lead him into the battlefield of temptation? That would be like a father saying to his son, 'Son, I love, you, you mean everything to me' and then taking him to the grossest toilet, and with his friends watching, saying, 'now I want you to clean this out.' Why would he do that? Why would God lead Jesus into a desert, to be tested like this?

Well, think about two other sons of God: Adam and the people of Israel, both described as sons of God; both of whom faced temptation; and both of whom fell flat on their faces in failure.

Adam's temptation came in the garden, as the serpent came for his wife, and Adam listened to her and to the snake and fell for it. And now, Jesus, the second Adam, is here, except the garden has become a wilderness, and he too must face the serpent.

And Israel, they faced multiple temptations in the wilderness over 40 years - and just as they were about to enter the promised land, Moses reminded them of them. Deut 8:2-5, 'And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna… that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD… Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you.'

So why did God allow Israel to face trials and temptations in the desert? To humble her, to bring up issues in the hearts of the people that needed dealing with, to teach them to trust him, and to learn that ultimately it is only God who will satisfy them. And he did it all with the heart of a father who wants his beloved son to mature into a man.

And yet Israel constantly failed the test. But now, here comes Jesus, the ultimate Israel, being led into the wilderness, hungry after 40 days of fasting.

So, the question is, will he succeed where Adam failed? Will he stay faithful where Israel didn't? And if their testing revealed what was in their hearts, what will the testing of this Son of God reveal about him?

You see, when life is hard or you're facing significant temptation and you just want to give in, you can seriously question what God is up to, can't you? Why has he led me into this wilderness, why is he letting me go through this? And you can begin to doubt whether there is any higher purpose in you going through what you're going through.

John Newton the slave trader turned pastor famously said, "All shall work together for good. Everything is needful that he sends. Nothing can be needful that he withholds." So whilst you might never know the precise reason why God let's you go through what you go through, what the testing of Jesus tells us is that when God allows trials and temptation to come our way – he has his reasons. In Newton's words, 'everything is needful that he sends', and as a son with his father, we must trust him.

But like Adam and Israel, when we do face times like this we are prone to wobble aren't we? Sure, we have moments of victory, but there are also those times when we give way before the tempter; when we don't learn the lessons our Father is trying to teach us in the heat of the battle.

Which is why we need another to take the battlefield for us. The question though, as the Spirit leads him into the wilderness, is 'how will he do?'

My Wants or God's Word?
Look at v3, 'And the tempter came to him.' And that is the way evil works, isn't it? This is how Satan tries to have his way in your life – by tempting; by trying to draw you onto the wrong track, by having you think in that moment when temptation comes that life would be better, that you'd be happier, if you lived it this way, rather than God's way. And so the devil comes to Jesus and says, v3 again, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

Now, on the surface, what's his tactic here? Isn't it to get Jesus to doubt God's word? In the garden, with Adam and Eve, it was "did God really say…?" And now Satan says to Jesus, "Did God really say that? That you're his son? Is that really true? Let me just sow a doubt in your mind about the truthfulness of God's word to you."

And that's a powerful weapon against your own heart and your own faith, isn't it? To suggest that God's word is less than trustworthy. Sure God says he loves you, sure he says he will turn every situation for your good, but can you *really* trust that, can you really trust *him?* And do you *really* think you'll be happy living God's way? Let me suggest an alternative."

But there's something more here, because the way it's written implies that Satan knows Jesus *is* the Son of God and he's getting him to question, not the fact of that, but the implications of it. Ok, says the devil, since you are the Son of God, why don't you use that power, and your rights, to satisfy your needs. Look Jesus, you're hungry, you've not eaten for 40 days, but you're God's son, you deserve some food.

So notice what he does. He goes for what he thinks is Jesus' weak spot. Now, if you know the book or the film, *The Hobbit*, to kill Smaug, the dragon, Bard the Bowman has to aim an arrow into the one spot where there's a chink in his scales. But, here, the roles are reversed and the dragon aims his arrow into a chink he perceives in Jesus' armour. Jesus is hungry, so let's talk about food. And that's what he does in your life, isn't it? You're tired, you're down, you're lonely, or just alone, you're stressed, it's late and you are vulnerable. Now sure he also works on our strengths - those areas where we are prone to be proud and think ourselves invincible and don't need God's help, but he also goes for our weak spots. Enemies always do.

And so he suggests that, Son of God that he is, Jesus shouldn't have to suffer hunger. He deserves better than this – 'Hunger's for others, Jesus, not for you.'

Now, is Satan really all that interested in whether Jesus creates bread or not? And is he really all that interested in what he tempts you with, or not? What he's really interested in is breaking Jesus' relationship with his Father. To have him live for himself, to use his power for his own ends rather than for God's will. And aren't there times when you face the same: when the thought comes, 'I deserve better than this; I need to feed my needs, my wants.' And in that moment it's, 'do I live God's way or take things into my own hands for my own ends?'

In the garden, Adam had every tree to eat from but one, and yet he still chose to satisfy himself rather than obey God. And in the desert, in their hunger, Israel turned against God. And aren't there times when you give in to temptation and feed what you think in that moment is a need, a want, even something you deserve? Maybe that's to watch something you shouldn't watch, or respond out of anger to someone, or insist on your own way. But the temptation is there and you follow it.

But here is Jesus and he responds very differently. Verse 4, 'But he answered, "It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' And he quotes back to Satan the words Moses used in Deut 8 about Israel's testing and failure in the desert. You see, the enemy would have you think that you will only be really satisfied in life if you do give in, when you do feed your appetite – whether that's for food, or fame, or success or sex. That living God's way can't really satisfy you, that you'll go hungry if you do, so satisfy yourself – just do it.

But Jesus is going to be a different sort of Son – he's going to nourish and feed his heart on God and his word and walk in obedience to him: because he knows that's where you find real life, that's what really energizes you. And even if it's hard, it's a good hard.

But what of the second temptation?

Test God or Trust God?

The devil takes Jesus to the highest point in the temple, and says, v6, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written…' Interesting isn't it? Jesus repelled the first temptation by quoting Scripture, and so Satan attacks again by… quoting scripture, or, more precisely, misquoting it. And the wrong use of Scripture is another weapon in his armoury isn't it? – to twist what God says. And he quotes Psalm 91, about how God will protect those whom he loves. But the meaning of Psalm 91 is not, 'now go put yourself in danger so you can prove God's care for you.' It's 'when you are in danger, God will care for you.'

In other words, Satan says, 'Jesus, you can dispel any doubts you might have about being God's son, or about God's fatherly love for you, by doing this; and think how much better you'll feel once you've done it.'

But that's not trusting God, is it? That's testing him. It's the temptation to try and manipulate God, to have him dance to your tune. And it has this veneer of putting your life in God's hands, but in reality it's the temptation we all face to take life into our own hands, and God must do what I want him to do, and I get to dictate what happens to my life, and God, you must serve me and protect me and prove yourself to me, or I'm outta here.

But that's not what you do in a relationship of love is it?

At our wedding Su and I had the hymn that goes, 'Trust and obey for there is no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.' You see, when you go through hard times, the pain and the difficulty you experience in those times is increased, not decreased, when you try and force God's hand, or complain against God for not acting according to your time scale or dancing to your tune. And as your stress levels rise and bitterness festers, your suffering doesn't decrease, it increases. But trusting him, that he is good, and withholds nothing that I need, that quietens our souls.

So once again, to deflect Satan's attack, Jesus takes up the word of God, what Paul calls 'the sword of the Spirit' (Eph 6:17). And how many times might we more successfully combat temptation if we had an armoury of Scripture at our disposal like Jesus? Paul told Timothy to train himself in godliness. And guys, are you doing that? He says physical training is of some value, but godliness is of value to all things. So, do you expend as much energy training yourself for godliness as you do physically? The psalmist said 'I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you' (Ps 119:11). Well, are you doing that? Are you taking deliberate steps, reading the word, meditating, memorising, hiding it in your heart, so that when the day of temptation comes, you're armed? Or are you more like a spiritual couch-potato?

And Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:16, where Moses reminded Israel how they had demanded that God provide for them and says, v7, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." So unlike Israel, Jesus stands and doesn't fall. He won't manipulate God. He will trust him, not test him.

My Empire or God's Kingdom?

Well if quoting Scripture didn't work, next Satan does the opposite and suggests Jesus breaks it. Verse 8-9, 'The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me", if you will break the first, and most important commandment.

Now Jesus knew from the Psalms and the prophets that one day Messiah would receive the nations as his heritage, that one day every knee will bow before him. And yet here is the devil saying, 'yes, but I can also give that to you. And you don't need to take the hard way to get it. There is an alternative. I can give you the kingdom and the power and the glory now, and it doesn't need to cost you anything!'

Except it does, doesn't it? Falling for Satan's temptations always cost you something: "If you will fall down and worship me." So will this Son stay loyal to the Father? Because Adam didn't. He swallowed the serpent's line that he could become like God and sit on the throne of his own life and dictate for himself what was right and wrong. And time and again Israel hadn't. In the desert they worshipped the golden calf, and after and whenever it served them to do so, they ran after other gods.

Stanley Hauerwas, the American ethicist, wrote about what Jesus is offered here and said, 'Politics and power is all about worship and sacrifice.' What will you sacrifice for influence or wealth, or power? To what gods will you bow down to get what you want in life? Now, you and I are small fry, so you're not going to get offered the world. But what will you, what have you been offered, if only you will compromise, if only you will worship at another altar? A moment of pleasure? A step up the ladder? A chance to gain influence? Or simply the knowledge that you have got your way?

It's the temptation to build your own empire, to have a slice of the world and its glory, but to do so you have to displace God as your ultimate.

And here is Jesus being offered the world, and his response? Verse 10, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." And once again Jesus turns Scripture into a sword, because he knows that God requires our undivided loyalty. And Jesus will claim the crown, the kingdom, the power and the glory will be his, but it will be by God's way.

The Place of Victory

Now what someone *doesn't* say often tells you as much as what they do say, doesn't it? And in his second temptation, Satan quotes Psalm 91:12. But strangely enough he doesn't quote the next verse, v13, to Jesus: 'You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.'

Funny he should miss that out, isn't it? Because does that ring any bells for you? 'The serpent you will trample underfoot?' You see, in the aftermath of Adam's failure, in Genesis 3:15, God made a vow to the serpent: "I will put enmity

between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." So God promises that another Adam, another son is going to come, except this one won't give way before the serpent, but will crush his head. But in doing so he himself will be crushed.

And whilst here, in the wilderness, Jesus vanquishes Satan, the day will come when it will seem as if the tables are turned. Because here Satan questions Jesus' identity: 'If you are the Son of God…' and those same words will be hurled at Jesus as he hangs on the cross, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matt 27:40). If you are the Son of God – save yourself! And yet it was there, at the cross, in him being crushed for our iniquities, that he saves us and crushes the serpent's head. And in what seemed the ultimate place of failure, where darkness had its hour, Jesus secured the sweetest victory.

You see, here, in the wilderness, Satan suggests Jesus serve himself and make some bread. Instead he became our servant, and gave his body as bread broken for us. Satan offers him the world and its glory. But Jesus didn't come for the world's glory, he came for its sinners. For people like us, who fail and fall before temptation.

And it's his victory in the place of testing that makes his ultimate victory at the cross possible, because he goes to it righteous, to give his life in exchange for ours – the righteous for the unrighteous.

But it's also his overcoming temptation that makes your overcoming possible. Peter says, 'Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith' (1 Peter 5:8-9). Faith in what? Faith in the conquering Son of God, who promises to give you the strength you need for your trial. That when you face temptation you can look to him who resisted temptation and threw himself into the battle for you. And as you do, you'll see Satan's cheap and trivial trinkets for what they are, and sin will lose its lustre, and Christ will shine ever brighter. And you'll choose him.

And as you see Jesus like that, it will ignite a love inside you for his word. And you'll read it, and learn it, and when temptation comes, rather than quitting the fight, in the Spirit you'll take up the sword. And you'll choose God's word, over your wants, and you'll trust him rather than test him, and you'll choose his kingdom over your empire.

And God will use what the enemy means for your harm for your good, and change you to be ever more like Jesus, the faithful, victorious, Son of God.