

“In the Jungle . . . a Lion”

Matthew 3:13-17, 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13; 1 Peter 5:8-9 ¹

“And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him. . . . Then Jesus was led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted there by the Devil’ (Matthew 3:17-4:1).

“With night came horror. Not only were the starving wolves growing bolder, but lack of sleep was telling upon Henry. He dozed despite himself, crouching by the fire, the blankets about his shoulders, the axe between his knees, and on either side a dog pressing close against him. He awoke once and saw in front of him, not a dozen feet away, a big gray wolf, one of the largest of the pack. And even as he looked, the brute deliberately stretched himself after the manner of a lazy dog, yawning full in his face and looking upon him with a possessive eye, as if, in truth, he were merely a delayed meal that was soon to be eaten.

“This certitude was shown by the whole pack. Fully a score he could count, staring hungrily at him or calmly sleeping in the snow. They reminded him of children gathered about a spread table and awaiting permission to begin to eat. And he was the food they were to eat! He wondered how and when the meal would begin. . . .

“He came out of a doze that was half nightmare, to see the red-hued she-wolf before him. She was not more than half a dozen feet away, sitting in the snow and wistfully regarding him. The two dogs were whimpering and snarling at his feet, but she took no notice of them. She was looking at the man, and for some time he returned her look. There was nothing threatening about her. She looked at him merely with a great wistfulness, but he knew it to be the wistfulness of an equally great hunger. He was the food, and the sight of him excited in her the gustatory sensations. Her mouth opened, the saliva drooled forth, and she licked her chops with the pleasure of anticipation.

“A spasm of fear went through him. He reached hastily for a brand to throw at her. But even as he reached, and before his fingers had closed on the missile, she sprang back into safety; and he knew that she was used to having things thrown at her. She had snarled as she sprang away, baring her white fangs to their roots, all her wistfulness vanishing, being replaced by a carnivorous malignity that made him shudder.”²

As we make our way through the life of Jesus on our way to Holy Week and Pentecost, we come this morning to Jesus’ hand-to-hand combat with Satan in the wilderness. Jack London’s powerful portrayal of being stalked by death in the frozen wastelands of the northern wilds allows us to enter viscerally into Jesus’ encounter with the Devil in a desert wilderness, for the dynamics of these meetings were very similar. In neither case did the hunter win the prey, but that outcome was far from a foregone conclusion at the outset. And in both cases, life and death literally hung in the balance.

Jesus had just been baptized. God the Son had just made His first public declaration of His identity and purpose. God the Father had just given His blessing to Jesus, and God the Spirit had physically landed on Jesus’ shoulder in the form of a dove. And now, in the very next verse, the Spirit takes Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted—to be tested—by the Devil. What in heaven’s name was that all about?

The day after tomorrow, Verizon Wireless is expected to announce that Apple’s iPhone is coming to their network. The process of developing, testing, and going online with this new

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on January 9, 2011.

² Jack London, *White Fang*, serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post*, June 20-July 18, 1903 (www.geocities.com/jacklondons/1wf3.html).

phone has taken many months, because with all the hoopla preceding this announcement, once the “switch is thrown,” these phones have to work flawlessly on their new network. The corporation’s profitability and reputation are at stake.

Much more significantly, God’s plan for undoing the power of Evil in the created order had been in process since before Creation began (Revelation 13:8), and it was almost time to “throw the switch.” There was no backup plan. Our eternal destiny was at stake.

Jesus went into the wilderness to face Satan down in personal combat as the final test before “going online.” If Jesus could stand His ground against Satan’s most powerful, focused, and undiluted attacks, then He was ready for the attacks that would come later, as well.

In order to understand this battle scene, we must remember that though He was fully God (Philippians 2:6), Jesus had voluntarily given up any independent use of His unlimited sovereign power in order to fully experience our humanity. Was this combat in Matthew 4 something that a camera would have seen and a tape recorder would have heard? I don’t know. There were no witnesses to the encounter, so the Gospel writers had to get the story from Jesus himself, but Jesus told the story as if it were an objective event, not a subjective experience.³

Satan used several approaches in this combat. First, he appealed to Jesus’ human desires. Taunting Jesus, and making use of the fact that Jesus was physically very hungry after several weeks of fasting, Satan said, “*IF you are the Son of God, then prove it by feeding yourself from these stones. If you are *really* the one who made all this stuff, then changing a rock into a loaf of bread should be no big deal.*”

“**NO!**” Jesus *shouted*. “*The Scriptures say, ‘People need more than bread for their life; they must feed on every word of God’ (Deuteronomy 8:3). The strength of Jesus’ rebuttal may have come from the fact that the temptation had struck its mark. Our adversary knows our weaknesses, and exploits them shamelessly. Still, Jesus stood His ground.*”

Second, Satan appealed to the desires of the people, who expected the Messiah to make a spectacular appearance at the Temple (Malachi 3:1). “*IF you are the Son of God, then prove it by jumping off the parapet of the Temple and making a huge media splash. The people will be so impressed, and your work will be a piece of cake after that.*”

In this second attempt, Satan even quoted scripture (Psalm 91:11-12). It was a clever move. Satan knows his Bible. But Jesus returned the volley without blinking: “*The Scriptures also say, ‘Do not test the Lord your God’” (Deuteronomy 6:16).*

Finally, Satan appealed to Jesus’ divine intent to become sovereign over all creation. “Look,” he said. “I know you want to rule over all the world, and I know how you plan to do it. But what you have in mind is crazy. There’s a much easier way. I have a revolution pretty well underway here. If you’ll just agree to work with me rather than pursuing your Dad’s weird ideas, I can be a big help to you.”

Jesus parried the blow, commanding, “*Get out of here, Satan. For the Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the Lord your God; serve only him’ (Deuteronomy 6:13).* It was a one-two-three

³ Jesus himself and the New Testament as a whole treat Satan and demonic powers as if they are absolutely real. The words “Satan,” “Devil,” “demon” and “demons” occur 148 times in the Bible. One hundred thirty-two of these occurrences are in the New Testament, and 89 of them have to do with Jesus. C.S. Lewis wrote that “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight” (C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* [1941; Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976], p. 17).

knockout, and Satan acknowledged his defeat by retreating . . . “*until the next opportunity came*” (Luke 4:13).⁴

Jesus returned from his desert combat with great spiritual power, and His life began to produce amazing results. That can happen in our lives, too.⁵

I’ve enjoyed thinking of your reaction to the title of this sermon. For many of you, I suspect that the title called to mind the words, “In the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight.”⁶ That song, “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” was most recently made famous in the Disney film, *The Lion King*, and I thought about having the choir sing the song as the background for this sermon . . . but decided against it (probably to the great relief of some and the disappointment of others!).

The Narnia films have more recently showcased the leonine character of Aslan, who represents Jesus in *The Chronicles of Narnia*;⁷ and a lion has been the symbol for the Tribe of Judah in Israel for more than three thousand years. But as appealing as these images may be, the Bible also tells us of a sinister lion, whom we met in our second text a few minutes ago. There Peter wrote, “*Be careful! Watch out for attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour*” (1 Peter 5:6).

This lion is not merely metaphorical, and the danger he presents is no idle philosophical meandering. Literally from cover to cover, the Bible tells us that we are caught up in a deadly battle in which we’re pitted against spiritual forces of evil that will overwhelm and destroy us if we’re not under God’s protection (Revelation 12:17). And if Satan becomes unable to destroy us because of God’s protection through Jesus, he will do everything he can to compromise our witness, to distract us with petty issues, and to trap us in meaningless religious activity, rendering us useless—and sometimes worse than useless—in the battle that rages all around us for the souls of humankind.

⁴ Hebrews tells us that Jesus “*faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin*” (4:15). The Bible doesn’t record all of Jesus’ life, of course. Most of the Gospel accounts focus on just the last week of His life. But here are just a few temptations that we know about:

- Jesus faced temptations to meet His own needs, to be politically correct, to take the easy way out, but He didn’t take it.
- Jesus was tempted to buy into conventional prejudices about poor people, rich people, immoral people, and religious people, but He persistently related to everyone He met as someone treasured by God.
- Jesus was tempted to “go along to get along” with the political leaders of Jerusalem, but He chose time after time to do the right thing rather than the politically correct thing.
- Jesus was tempted to exercise His divine power rather than live within His voluntary human limitations, but He kept a steady course.
- Jesus was tempted to let His love for His family and His desire for their approval keep Him from doing what God called Him to do, but He did not waver.
- Jesus was tempted to give in to discouragement when His efforts looked pretty hopeless, but He did not quit.
- Jesus was tempted to call it quits when things began to get really dangerous, but He did not turn back. Jesus kept his eye on the goal.

And how did Jesus successfully meet these temptations? He used God’s own words, given to us in Scripture.

⁵ Notice what happened when these temptations were over: (1) angels came to encourage Jesus (Matthew 4:11); (2) Jesus returned to Galilee filled with the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:14); (3) Jesus began to teach, preach, and heal, and large crowds followed him wherever he went (Matthew 4:23-25).

⁶ Solomon Linda and The Evening Birds, “Mbube” (Zulu for “lion”; South Africa: Gallo Records, 1939); also known as “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” or “Wimoweh,” popularized by The Tokens in 1961 and appearing in Disney’s film *The Lion King* (1994). “Wimoweh” was a mishearing of the Zulu “Uyimbube,” which means “You are a lion.”

⁷ The most recent film was *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Walden Media, 2010.

Let me quickly mention seven principles we can learn from Jesus' use of Scripture that are essential for survival in the wilderness of spiritual combat:

1. Satan and the forces of darkness are real (Luke 10:18; Ephesians 6:11-12). The universe is far stranger than we have imagined, and its most significant dimensions are not perceptible to our ordinary senses. Satan is never more successful than when he has you convinced that he is a fantasy of superstitious minds. *Satan and the forces of darkness are real.*
2. Satan is a liar and a master of disguise. Many of the dangers we'll face won't look evil. Terrorists routinely attack in innocent-looking disguise, and Satan himself can masquerade as an angel of light (John 8:44; 2 Corinthians 11:14). As Klyne Snodgrass put it, "Evil rarely looks evil until it accomplishes its goal; it gains entrance by appearing attractive, desirable, and perfectly legitimate. It is a baited and camouflaged trap."⁸ *Satan is a liar and a master of disguise.*
3. Satan intends to destroy you. From Genesis 3 through Revelation 20, Satan's every effort is to frustrate God's purposes and to disrupt God's redemptive action in human lives. "Be careful!" Peter wrote, "Satan intends to destroy you."
4. Satan knows your weaknesses—all of them—and he will use them to his advantage. Satan knows which temptations are the biggest problems for you and for me. As one of my friends noted, "Satan knows where my goat is tied." He knows how to get our goat!

Satan will ambush us when we're vulnerable, when we're lonely, tired, sick, hungry, or discouraged. Satan will also ambush us when we're successful, using our strength against us like a martial arts expert of the first order. Satan is guaranteed to ambush us any time we are trying to grow spiritually. *The one thing we can count on is that we will be ambushed.* (Matthew 6:13, 26:41)

5. Bible study is not for wimps; it's for warriors (Matthew 4:1-11; Ephesians 6:17). When Jesus was doing "hand-to-hand" combat with Satan in the wilderness, the weapon he used was the Word of God (Matthew 4:1-11). When Paul listed the personal protection we need for spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6, the only weapon he mentioned was "*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*" (Ephesians 6:17).⁹

Only if we know the Bible well will we be able to recognize when it's being used to camouflage evil rather than to serve the Good. Only if we know the Bible well, internalizing it through much reading and study, will we be able to deploy its truths in spiritual combat. And only if we know the Bible well will we be able to recognize things taken out of context and twisted to suit false purposes.

6. Knowing the Bible will only help us if we do what it tells us to do. Our ability to resist temptation is like a spiritual muscle. It grows stronger with exercise, and the repetitions get easier (Luke 6:46; 1 Corinthians 10:13). Jesus not only knew Scripture, he obeyed it. Satan knows it, too, and he'll use it against us if we're not prepared to do battle. *But knowing the Bible will only help us if we do what it tells us to do.*

Being prepared for battle means applying ourselves to studying God's Word, not as a last-minute effort on Sunday morning, but as carefully as we might read the manual

⁸ Klyne Snodgrass, "Ephesians," *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 339).

⁹ "Prayer in the power of the Spirit" could also be understood as a weapon, both offensive and defensive (Ephesians 6:18).

for a firearm or another dangerous piece of equipment. Paul told Timothy to “*Work hard so God can approve you. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15).

7. Keep your eyes on the goal. The more in love you are with God, the easier it is to do the things that take you to Him (Hebrews 12:2). Our soldiers in Afghanistan are carrying out their duties because that’s the right thing to do; but their deeper motivation is that after they’ve accomplished their mission, they can come home. So it is with us. We have work to do here for the cause of God’s Kingdom, but when our work is done, we’ll get to go home! (Philippians 3:12-14; Hebrews 12:2).

My friends, Satan’s promise of dominion was—and is—an empty lie. Jesus was victorious both in the desert and on the Cross, defeating Satan at the very center of his power. And Jesus still says to us today, “*I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33).