

Week 20

The Temptations in the Desert

Guide: Testing



There is no greater self-revelation than to let one's temptations show. In this week's contemplation, Jesus shows us what he wrestled with. In our growing desire to know him, in our deepening affection for him, in this powerful attraction to being with him in his mission, we are drawn to understand his struggles. As he reveals to us the depths of his inner process to be free to do God's will, we see that Jesus knows us in our growing desire to be free.

There are a number of key elements in our contemplation this week that help us frame our reflection.

- *Jesus does not run from temptation.* In fact, the Holy Spirit of God leads him to the desert to face these demons.
- *Jesus fasts first.* He wants to be lean and prepared and alert and hungry.
- *Jesus is facing his identity.* The temptations are all about how he is who he is.
- *Jesus is confronting temptations to use his personal power for himself,* rather than for others.

Freedom is all about confronting the temptation to use one's power to feed oneself. The demon is always to focus on our hungers and to fear we will starve. Self-absorption always defeats our ability to freely give ourselves for others. The Gospels tell us Jesus knew this temptation. He learned to depend on God's word for his nourishment. Then he was free to be broken and given as food for us all.

To be free, we must confront the ability we have to use our gifts to attract others to ourselves. It's a tragedy to be gifted and manipulative. Our inner self becomes hollow when we desire only attention, affirmation, to be liked, to be accepted. Jesus faced this temptation. He chose not to arrogantly use his gifts. He chose freedom. His first choice was to give himself to whatever God desired. Then he could joyfully accept unpopularity, being unattractive, and even being rejected if they helped him be who he was called to be—for others.

The desire for freedom will always bring us face-to-face with a desire for our own kingdom. What can I collect, achieve, accomplish, be recognized for, point to as a symbol of my self-worth? Jesus knew this temptation. He came to live in the freedom of the prayer: "The kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever."

Use the helps to get started and support this week's contemplation. Throughout our week, each and every day this week, these temptations and the freedom Jesus chose can be part of our consciousness. We will grow in love for him. And our own desires to be with him in his freedom will grow.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

Getting started this week is easy. Read Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the temptations. Then put the text of the Scripture aside. What is important for us in contemplating this mystery of Jesus' being tempted is that we enter into its meaning.

The kind of reflection that will help is to ask, What is going on when *I* am tempted? Doesn't it mean that part of me really *wants* what I'm tempted to? It doesn't matter whether it's the temptation to eat a whole bag of potato chips or of chocolate, or something much more serious. A battle is going on between *some want or desire* and the inner conviction that this is not good for me. What does it mean that, in his hunger, Jesus was tempted to turn stone into loaves of bread? This is not about a temptation to use magical powers frivolously. It must be that there is a battle between his inner desires.

All week long, in various in-between times, we can reflect on what this inner struggle to feed himself must have been. What kind of concrete, personal examples come to mind?

We may want to take some individual prayer times in our busy schedule to pray, using our imagination, to picture a scene in which we can *witness* the temptation for Jesus. I might become a character in that scene and find myself touched, moved with admiration and love, at the self-revelation with which he graces me. I could do this with each temptation.

Throughout the week, however, we can benefit from the supportive patterns we have used in the retreat from the beginning. As I get out of bed in the morning, I can focus my attention on what this week is about and what my desire is for this day: deeper insight into this person who has loved me with his very life and who I am coming to understand and love more deeply.

Throughout each day this week, I can make use of all the background times not only to reflect on the images of the tempted Jesus that come to me but also to see this mystery acted out in the mystery of my day-to-day life. If he was really tempted in every way I am, then I can learn about his heart and personality by letting the temptations that come up in my daily life give some shape and color to my reflection on his temptations. Then, every time I feel tempted to be angry or cynical, manipulative or noncooperative, dishonest or unjust, indifferent or just plain selfish, I learn about the heart of Jesus.

Finally, every evening when I go to bed, I can take a brief time to express my gratitude in words that become increasingly personal—friend to friend—expressing what I feel and asking for what I desire.

For the Journey: Walk in Faith

We pray this week with the listening Jesus. This past week, we watched his being baptized and his going public as the Christ. He heard his Father publicly announcing that he is the Beloved.

In the Gospel of Matthew, this baptism takes place at the end of the third chapter. Matthew offers us the drama of Jesus' listening to the Tempter at the beginning of the very next chapter. Ignatius presents us with the same sequence. Jesus, because he has listened to his Father's ordaining voice, is free to listen to the unordaining or discrediting temptations of the Evil One.

We enter the scene to watch and listen ourselves to the attractiveness of the devil's invitations and the simplicity of Jesus' self-acceptance. Jesus does more than reject the temptations; he more honestly receives himself. We are aware of our attractions to riches, power, and control. These are all so many ways of trying to find and express our fragile selves. Ignatius offers to those who would want to follow Jesus the experience of rejecting the falseness of any identities that come from material or social

validation. Jesus has listened and believed and now begins the life of living out his belief in his Father and who he is in his Father's own words.

We pray this week watching the devil try to impeach Jesus. It is a tense debate and we are encouraged to be faithful to the tensions created by our own fragile senses of who God says we are. The Evil One constantly works to falsify our sense of our dignity, our ordination into Christ, and our holiness. We too have been baptized into Christ and his dignity. We too hear the insistent urgings to not believe in the me whom God has created and Jesus has blessed.

We perhaps listen to the sigh of relief that Jesus makes at the departure of the Tempter. Perhaps it is a prayer of gratitude and a peaceful prayer of trust that comes from his knowing who he really is. He also knows the Tempter will return in many ways during his life and that it is not the last time his baptismal ordination will be challenged. We may watch him resting there alone but not unaccompanied. He is beginning to experience the unity between him and his Father, which does not have to be proved by changing stones into bread.

Ignatius invites us in the Spiritual Exercises to walk more by faith in the care of God's love than by using signs and proofs as crutches for the journey. This pilgrimage to which we are called is not easy and extremely against the ways of our world and our own natural desires for maps, road signs, and assurances. We pray patiently with ourselves this week and watch Jesus turn knowingly toward us as he invites us to pick up our fragile lives and walk into his future and our own.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Jesus,

How human you really are! Thank you for inviting me to be with you in your temptations. I was touched to be with you at such a vulnerable time. I know you were hungry after forty days without food. Yet the devil's suggestion to turn stones into bread didn't seem like a challenge to do a magic act. It seemed to be more about how you resisted the temptation to fill your immediate need to end your hunger. You wanted to end your fast only if it seemed like God's will, not a more worldly motivation. The bigger temptation was to wrestle with the appeal to glorify yourself. The devil invited you into something that appeared not so bad: the devil promised you power and glory. What a temptation it must have been to justify yourself, to finally force people to see you as a powerful and important person.

I watched as you struggled with it, telling yourself first that it would be a good thing, that it would advance your ministry and help you reach more people. Then you had to stop and hold it up to God, your father and the source of your life. As you bowed in prayer, you knew that your glory wasn't what you wanted. You wanted to be free enough of the chains of self-absorption that your deepest desire was to serve God. You couldn't possibly accept power or honors—unless it came from God.

Dear friend, how can I learn that kind of strength from you? How many times do I fail in my temptations and make a decision based not on God's desire for me but on my own desire to avoid humiliation or to look successful? Help me to want only to serve God, to be free of the traps of accomplishments and recognition, and to feel the joy that comes with that freedom.

As I get to know you more and more, I want to be more like you, to live my life like yours. Thank you for your friendship. Thank you for being with me and for inviting me so deeply.

Scripture Readings

Mark 1:12–13

Matthew 4:1–11

Luke 4:1-13