

Then the curse of God was spoken:

"You'll lie crushed beneath his feet!" Amen. (CW #499:3)

If you haven't figured it out yet, people who say the Christian life is all sunshine and gummy bears are wrong. Living for Christ is war. Every morning when you plant your feet on the ground, you step onto the battlefield. This battle rages everywhere, even within us. It's the battlefield of temptation.

It started when the ancient serpent led Adam and Eve to believe the most monstrous lie of all: God is not good, and following his will is no good. Ever since their defeat, we are sitting ducks for the exact same temptation played out in a million different ways, day after day. On this battlefield we have all been wounded, battered and defeated.

But today, we are not on the battlefield. Today there are only two: that ancient serpent called the devil (Revelation 12:9), and the Son of God, who took on flesh as our brother (Hebrews 2:14-15). Today, **the Son of God goes to war.**

And this is no accidental encounter. **Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (4:1).** The Holy Spirit leads Jesus to war immediately after his baptism, with his head still wet, with the Father's words still ringing in his ears – "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

The stakes of this battle could not be higher. If Jesus gives in, the sinless Son of God is sinless no more. There is no Savior, no forgiveness, no way for sinners to go to heaven. If Jesus sins, the serpent's head cannot be crushed.

And that Serpent is no pushover. There is a reason Jesus calls him "the prince of this world" (John 14:30). He is the undefeated heavyweight champion of temptation. No mere human has ever withstood him.

Isn't Jesus perfect? Yeah, but so were Adam and Eve. Isn't Jesus the Son of God? Yeah, but God made a mistake. He had wrapped himself in human flesh (John 1:14). God cannot be tempted (James 1:13), but God in flesh and blood maybe is weak, and maybe vulnerable to temptation.

Isn't Jesus omnipotent? Yeah, but he won't use his almighty power. A true human being had fallen in the Garden. What God needs is true human obedience. So Jesus will not obliterate Satan with a word, or command his angels to drag him back to hell. Jesus must fight as a true brother, only with weapons available to human beings (Hebrews 2:17).

So the devil licks his chops, and picks the perfect time to attack. **After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread" (4:2-3).** Seems innocent enough, right? But the tempter is never innocent.

"So, Jesus, you are the Son of God. I guess I even heard your Father say he was well pleased with you. Sure looks like it today, doesn't it? Forty days in this wilderness – no food. Look at you man, you are literally starving! Where is your Father's love for you now? Doesn't he know you need to eat? But Jesus, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, and you have power. Use it. Turn these crusty stones into soft loaves."

Sound familiar? Do you recognize that temptation? "If God loves you so much, then why doesn't he take better care of you? If he's so great, why does he never seem to help? Why do you get sick for weeks, but people who don't go to church stay healthy? If he cares for you why doesn't he give you the prettiest face, so you get all the attention, or the smartest brain, so you get the best grades or the highest paying job? Forget God. You need to step up, take matters into your own hands, and turn these stones into bread."

But today no rocks become bread on the desert floor. **Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (4:4).**

Satan's arrow is deflected when Jesus quotes Scripture. "Yes, Tempter, my Father loves me. And I trust him to feed me in his own time, in his own way. I do not live by bread in the stomach alone; I live on God's faithfulness to everything he promises."

An empty appeal to an empty belly gets him nowhere. But the devil notices Jesus' trust in his Father, and attacks it. **Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone'" (4:5-6).** Did you hear that? The devil uses God's own Word against God's own Son!

"So, Son of God, we've established that you trust your Father. He's going to take care of you. Sounds great. Let's test it out. Here, see those stones below the temple? Take the leap of faith. It's written that his angels will protect you, and if angels are flying anywhere, they're flying around the temple, right? You trust God; good. See if he is faithful to his Word."

Sound familiar again? Every single one of us knows what it's like to put God to the test. To set up your own personal criteria for what God must do to show that he cares.

"If you are a good God, this is what you should do, right here, right now. Take away this cancer. Pay my mortgage. Give me friends. Spare her life. Answer this prayer, this way, this time, and I'll know you love me."

Just a little test, right? You might never call it that, but that's what it is. And if God doesn't pass your test? Then he's unloving, unfaithful, unkind, cruel. Throw yourself down; let's see if God can catch.

But today no body plummets to the ground below. **Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (4:7).**

Satan's attack is countered with another passage, the correct one. "Devil, you're not using that passage the right way. I trust that God loves me, and I will not put him to the test as though he could fail. Never. He will not."

Satan's best attacks are being flung right back at him, simply by speaking Scripture. But the devil has one left, and it's a doozy. **Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me" (4:8-9).** He offers an extravagant gift.

"Jesus, don't you think that your Father is asking too much of you? You spent the last forty days starving in the wilderness. And you know Scripture, so you know that suffering and torture and death are coming your way. God demands so much from you, and for what? To live and die for a world of sinners, most of whom will never believe in you? I ask a lot less, and I offer a lot more. Just bow down to me, and all the world's acceptance and praise and glory are yours."

Does that one sound familiar too? Satan always offers a better deal than God. Think about it: When someone you know dishonors Christ or defends evil, what do you do? Speak up, like God wants you to? That's how you wind up with lost friends, angry relatives, and alienated children.

Whereas Satan offers silence, or just nod your head and move on. You've got to work with them; you've got to live with them. Doesn't God get it? Just a little bow; no one will know. And you'll come to church on Sunday and sing the hymns anyway. Just bow down.

But today no one bends the knee. **Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (4:10).**

Jesus is not here to enjoy the world's splendor. He is here to carry the world's sin. "Satan, if my Father promises me the cross, fine. I will follow him even if he points me to the pit of hell ... and he will. But you are not my God, and I will never bow down to you."

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him (4:11).

Do you understand what just happened, the beauty of it all? It is not that Jesus gives us an example to follow; you know, quote the Word and send the devil running. Sure, he does that, but it's not the point.

You heard the Apostle Paul explain why this is such a big deal: "Just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19).

Do you see? This is the battlefield on which we lose, every day. Except today. Today, we win. Today, the war is over. Because today, **the Son of God goes to war**, and defeats the devil for us.

Jesus is our Substitute, the second Adam, and he establishes the record of perfect human obedience that none of us, not one of us, has ever been able to offer, not even for an hour, let alone a lifetime.

During Lent we ponder the suffering and death of Jesus. But his suffering means nothing if he is a sinner. His death on the cross is worthless unless he offers up a perfect life. His tomb gets to keep his rotting carcass unless he is sinless.

But he is. It is written: "[He] has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Perfect every day, for you – not just forty days in the wilderness, but his entire life! Overcoming every temptation in your place, because you cannot.

For every sin you must confess, for all the defeats that trouble your conscience and still hurt your life – they've all been solved, by the Champion who fought in your place. Jesus takes his perfect record – that he struggled so much for (Hebrews 2:18)! – and he hands it to you. "Here, put this on," he says, "it's yours. For all of you who were baptized into me have clothed yourselves with me" (Galatians 3:27).

Today the devil is defeated. He puts his head right under Jesus' foot. The killing blow comes when Jesus dies on the cross, offering up his perfect life as the once and for all sacrifice for all your sins.

The beauty of Jesus' victory is that he gives it to us. We lose every battle and win the war. When did that ever happen? Only in the life of the Christian, because **the Son of God goes to war**, and gives his victory to you. Happy Lent. Amen.