

## LIVING IN THE SHADOWS *The Shadow of Temptation*

Matthew 4:1-11

February 22, 2026

The water was still dripping from his hair. You must remember that.

The River Jordan was only a heartbeat ago. One moment earlier, there's the crowd, the dove, the blinding light, the unmistakable booming voice from heaven: *You are my Son, the Beloved.*

And then, the Spirit—that same Spirit that hovered over the water, that descended like a dove—turns to a tornado. It doesn't "lead" him. I know what your Bible says, but Mark's Gospel gives us the right Greek verb. The verb is *ekballo*. It's what Jesus does to demons. The Spirit flings him, thrusts him, throws him, casts him, drives him away from the affirmations of the clouds and into the shadows of the wilderness.

Let's be clear at the start of Lent: the wilderness is not a punishment. It is not a detour. It is the arena. It is where the truth of our baptism is tested to its breaking point.

It's been forty days. The only thing Jesus has heard is his own breath and the sound of silence. No doubt he has felt forsaken. No doubt the memory of the water is beginning to feel like a kind of cruel mirage. This is when the Tempter moves in.

At first, temptation is a kind of polite suggestion. It knows when your defenses are down. It knows what you think you need. It arrives when you've begun to wonder if that voice at the river was a beautiful hallucination and nothing more.

The Tempter begins with a single word that unsettles everything you thought you knew: *if*.

*If you are the Son of God...*

Remember, just a chapter earlier the heavenly voice declared a definitive truth. *You are my son. Beloved.* The Tempter subtly shifts the ground. *IF you are.* For most

of us, that's all it takes. A question mark where there was once a period. The original identity theft. Every temptation that follows, all three, conceals the same trap.

*If you are who you think you are... If you are who you thought you heard God say you are... Prove it. Exploit it. Trade it in for something better.* That's the whole ballgame, folks. Losing yourself to prove yourself.

*Temptation one: turn these stones to bread.* Well, why not? It's been forty days. You're famished. You're starving. Here is a rock. Why wait for this God who lets supposedly beloved children go hungry? If you are God's Son, prove it.

There's the trap. Turn the stone to bread, and you've accepted the devil's premise. Jesus refuses. He quotes chapter and verse. Deuteronomy. *One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*

He anchors himself not in what he lacks, but in what God has spoken. The voice at the Jordan he trusts is more real than the hunger in his gut.

The shadows deepen. The Tempter takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple for temptation number two. And this time, the devil has a verse too—Psalm 91. *If God really loves you, God's angels will protect you.*

Listen to this. Not every voice that quotes the Bible speaks for God. The devil knows the text. He uses it to twist trust into leverage. *If God loves you, the angels will protect you.* "Leap," he says. "Force God's hand."

Same trap. *If you are really the Beloved, make God prove it.*

Again, Jesus reaches for holy words. *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*

And now the last temptation. The first two were really just warmups. This time, the Tempter takes Jesus to the mountaintop, and he shows him all the kingdoms of the world. Displayed before Jesus is all their wealth, all their power, all their reach. And these are not illusions. What's on offer here is real authority. Real influence. *All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.*

No more "if you are the Son of God." Now it's only a transaction. *You worship me; I give you authority. This is your chance to escape the wilderness and skip the cross. Seize the crown, straight to the throne. Trade your identity for power.*

Thucydides had written it centuries before. "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must." What the Tempter offers here is the logic of every empire. The powerful tighten their grip, and everyone else must learn their place.

And now Jesus could control it all. All he needs to do is give up his soul. This is the temptation that should keep the church up at night because it's the one we keep failing. The history of Christianity is littered with the wreckage of this bargain.

The church has blessed crusades and conquistadors. The church has sanctified slavery and segregation. The church has wrapped the cross in the banner of every empire that offered us a seat at the table.

It rarely starts that way. It almost never starts that way. Temptation whispers before it shouts. Temptation is more trickle than a flood. Gradually, comfort crowds out conviction. The great apostasies are built of defensible cowardice accumulated. And we are all guilty.

Perhaps we tell ourselves we can do more good from the inside. We tell ourselves that power is a tool safe in our God-fearing hands. Or we tell ourselves that we can bow a little and still be faithful. We ignore what we should know best about ourselves, especially in the Reformed theological tradition. We are well acquainted with the depth of our capacity for self-deception.

The devil shows up with a shortcut. It doesn't look evil. It looks effective. It looks like a crown without a cross. And Jesus says no. Jesus knew that a gospel in service of domination is no gospel at all. It is a deal with the devil.

And so, one final time, he reaches for his Bible. *Worship the Lord your God. Serve only him.* It's Deuteronomy again. It's the command given to a people who had chased after other gods and lost everything. Jesus knows his history, and he will not repeat it. But the question remains whether we will.

What does it mean, in the face of temptation, to worship God alone, to serve one Lord? Because it's easy to quote the verse. We can find it in our Bibles. The test comes when another kingdom makes us an offer. And that offer sounds pragmatic. It looks effective. The crown looks good on you.

The whisper is familiar. *It's either you or them. You can't afford too much compassion right now. You can't look weak.* Yes, it sounds reasonable, and that is the trap.

In his lonesome valley, Jesus walked another way. He told us where to find him. *What you do to the least of these, you do to me.* He told us who they were. The hungry. The stranger. The sick. The prisoner.

Do you hear that list? The very ones we are being told to ignore. When people without homes are treated as criminals instead of God's children... When vulnerable families lose even the most basic support... When neighbors are threatened because of how they look... And the church is silent or adds its own amen to the chorus of cruelty, we must have the courage to collectively ask:

*Which kingdom do we want to reflect?  
Whose voice will we obey?*

In this moment, Jesus is offered control over all the kingdoms of the world, and he refused because the price was simply too high. Worship shapes what we become. And whenever the church trades its voice for leverage, whenever we ignore the cross to gain access to power, whenever we defend what harms the least of these because it preserves our comfort, we are closer to that mountaintop than we think.

This temptation is not someone else's. It is ours. The voice that tempts institutions also tempts individuals. It sounds like wisdom. It's always positioned as patience. *Just wait. Not yet. The moment isn't right. Wait until you have more security. Wait until you have more influence.*

*Wait until someone else goes first. Wait until you've got less to lose.*

But the better moment never comes. You see, I know this temptation. I know the sound of the voice that says *not yet, not here, not now*. I've made that bargain, and maybe you have too. But here's the thing I am learning. There is no future version of your life where faithfulness is free. There is no tomorrow coming where courage costs you nothing.

And while you wait, you are becoming someone. Every day you stay silent, you practice silence. Every day you go along, you rehearse compliance, training yourself in apathy.

It occurs to me as I read Matthew 4 that the Tempter does not need our devotion if he can get our deferral—until the voice of Jesus becomes something we admire but no longer obey.

It occurs to me that the Tempter is patient. That he does not rush. He does not shout. He simply waits. And whispers. And those whispers sound like wisdom.

It is easy to forget. And when we forget, we begin to believe small stories about ourselves. That's why we need this place. It's why we need this time. It's why we need these people. Here, we remember.

Before you proved anything—before you earned anything, before you got it right or wrong—there was the water. And there was a voice. *You are mine. You are beloved*. And my friends, that is the truest thing that will ever be said about you.

Jesus took that promise to the wilderness, where the Tempter tried time and again to pry it loose. *If you are... prove it, exploit it, trade it in for something better*. All it costs you is your worship. He would not submit. He stayed himself. And just when all seemed lost, just when hope had faded, the angels arrived. I take great comfort in that because some days faithfulness will not feel like a victory march. It will feel like holding on.

Friends, we have one Lord. One Lord. One Lord. Serving Jesus may cost us. But we will keep what the powers of this world do not offer because they cannot give: we will keep our souls, our God-given identity.

**We will not bow to lesser gods.** Because, before the wilderness—before the whisper, before the stones, before the mountain and the Temple, before the Tempter's *if*—there was a voice at the edge of the water.

*You are mine. Beloved*. If we can remember that, we will find angels waiting in this wasteland. Amen.