

## Combat with the Devil: Fasting and Feasting

People of God, we have entered into the liturgical season of Lent. By the time of the Nicene Council in 325 what we now know as Lent had been well underway to being observed by the church in certain places. St. Athanasius makes reference to the 40 days leading up to Pascha, which is Easter. The 40 days were the time when catechumens would prepare themselves for their baptism on Easter Sunday, by devoting themselves to rigorous prayer and fasting and studying of Scripture and other acts of humility and contrition over their sins. And as this practice became more common and widespread, other church members also observed it along with the catechumens, as a way of remembering the time of their own initiation into the Church.

Eventually the time of preparation for baptism became a liturgical season in its own right and began to be observed by the whole Church, still retaining the preparatory nature of the season to help Christians become more spiritually prepared for the remembrance and celebration of Our Lord's Death and Resurrection.

And thus, for many Christians, Lent is a season of renewed religious zeal, a time of fasting and prayer. A time for repenting of sin and of performing acts of mercy. As we learned last week, the idea is that carrying one's cross with Jesus might all the better help us enjoy an Easter of Unending Joy.

The word 'Lent' comes from the Old English *lencten* meaning "springtime, spring" and "from West Germanic *langitinaz*, meaning "long-days" or "lengthening of the day." It refers to the

natural increase of sunlight leading to springtime during this time of year.

Now consider the paradoxical nature of the liturgical seasons with me. Advent begins in late November early December, and while the days grow shorter and darker, the Church anticipates the incarnation of the Light of the World, who would take on flesh in order to do battle with the Darkness and the Serpent.

Lent anticipates the Glory of the Resurrection, which is seen in the arrival of springtime and the lengthening of days, but in a paradoxical sort of way, it also is a time of spiritual affliction. As the world itself is coming to life, and waking out of its Winter slumber, and the days grow lighter and longer, we see the incarnate Christ go in the weakness of human flesh to do battle with the Devil in the wilderness.

Although I did not read it, the alternate OT reading for today was from Genesis 3, where Man, in the Garden and at the behest of the devil, exalted himself to be a god in place of God. Instead of communing with Living God by feasting at the Tree of Life, Adam succumbed to the temptation of the Devil, ate the forbidden fruit, and was devoured by pride. Thus he received and spread death to the world, turning the Garden into a wilderness.

It is in to this sin-cursed wilderness of a world, that the Son of God is led by the Spirit to be tempted by the Devil. In order to reverse the curse of Adam's Sin, and the sin of the national son of God, Israel, Jesus would fast and be tempted 40 days. His 40 days corresponds to the 40 years of Israel's wilderness wandering, where

they grumbled and put God to the test, by not believing His word. Jesus has therefore come to be a new and faithful Adam, and a new and faithful Israel, to reverse the sins of the Fathers. It is therefore only appropriate that he undergo the temptations of the Devil, in order to redeem us from the Devil's tyranny.

And so Son of God comes to do combat against the Pride of the Serpent by humbling himself to become a Man in place of man. Jesus does not fall into temptation by eating as Adam and Israel did, but instead he was victorious over the temptation through fasting. But the reason he was able to endure the onslaughts and temptations of the devil was because he had food which nobody knew about. His food was to do the will of His Father in heaven, which is the food that God has been desiring to feed His people for all of history.

Thus, by feasting on the Word of God, Jesus communed with His Father at the Tree of Life, and in this way the Spirit strengthened him in His weakness, and he was victorious over the Devil.

David likewise, for 40 days and nights, withstood the antagonism of Goliath, who is dressed in bronze armor and wearing a coat of scales, looking conspicuously like a serpent. Still thirsting for more blood, Goliath demands Israel send him a Man. And though outwardly weak, a Man indeed is sent to him.

David, like his son and Lord Jesus after him, presented himself to the Serpent Goliath, and as all sons of God have done throughout history, fought against the serpent, not with sword and spear, but in the Name of the Lord of Hosts. And his choosing five smooth

stones to sling at Goliath, signifies the verses which Jesus slung at the Devil from the five Books of Moses.

Just as the prophecy of Genesis 3 foretold that the serpent would have his head crushed by the seed of the woman, so David sinks the stone into the forehead of Goliath. And after he falls, David cuts off Goliath's head with Goliath's own sword.

In using Goliath's own sword to behead him, a prophecy is presented to us, where in its fulfillment was recorded in Hebrews 2 - *"that through death he [that is Jesus] might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."*

Just as David is victorious over Goliath, Jesus is victorious over the Devil. And precisely where Adam and Israel failed, Jesus succeeded. Paving the way for the rest of the sons of God to have victory over the devil, and to crush his head under our feet as well.

For as the Son of God was led by the Spirit to have victory over the Devil and his temptations, so the Apostle Paul teaches us in Romans 8 that *"if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."*

And here we learn that the path to the spiritual victory over the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the Devil have been always the same since the very beginning - being led by the Spirit to have a firm reliance upon the God and His Word.

It is the Word of God, which is the Sword of the Spirit, that we use to put to death the deeds of the flesh. And as Psalm 119:114: *You are my hiding place and my shield; I put my hope in Your word.*

It is ultimately God himself who is our refuge and strength and fortress. He is our shield and buckler. He delivers us from the snare of the fowler, and from the deadly pestilence, and from the arrows that fly by day, and the pestilence that stalks by night, He protects us from terror of the teeth of the devourer – when we place our hope, and faith and trust in God and in the omnipotent strength of His eternal and indestructible Word.

This was Adam's strength, but he forfeited it. This was Israel's strength, but they gave it away. This was David's strength, and He was victorious. This was Jesus's strength and he too was victorious.

And this is your strength, people of God. Will you be victorious? The Word of God is the Devil's undoing. One little Word shall fell him. Will you trust in the Word when he comes to tempt you? Or will you throw the Word away, and come out of your hiding place, and be picked off by the Devil.

This is what temptations are. They are tricks, the snares of the fowler, as Ps. 91 talks about, set by the devil to trap us. They are things which trick us to come out of our safe refuge in God and His Word and in Christ, and we stick up our heads and his snipes us as we crawl out of our secret place in God.

The Devil has always been trying to deceive us and get us to not put our trust in the word of God since the very beginning.

This is why he comes with subtlety, saying to Eve, the Bride, “Did God really say...?” Here in the wilderness he uses the same tactic, saying to Jesus, “If you are the son of God...”

Here Satan demands that Jesus furnish proof of the Word that the Father spoke from Heaven at His baptism, when He said, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*” But the Father’s Word is proof enough. It is the Word of God. There is no higher authority. There is no further court of appeal to verify the claims of God’s Word. And so, if the Devil can tempt Jesus to prove that He is the Son of God, he would actually prove He wasn’t, for then He would have sinned against His Father, by not trusting His Word to be true.

If Jesus attempts to prove to the Devil that he is the Son of God by turning stones into bread, or throwing himself down off the temple so that angels would catch him, he would have obeyed the Devil’s word, and not the Father’s.

This is also why we see Jesus not give in to the demands of the Jews throughout His ministry that he perform some sign or miracle which proves he is who he says he is. Jesus does not need to prove He is the Son of God to anyone. The Father has already spoken and testified.

And so, Jesus dons the shield of faith in God’s Word to deflect the Devil’s darts of temptation, and he fights back with the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Thus he counters three times with: It is written. It is written. It is written. And the first one is really the one we need to constantly remember. “*It is written: Man*

*shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”*

Consider the implication of this verse for your spiritual life during this season of Lent, and really, all your days. *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”*

If you are one who is going to dedicate yourself to certain spiritual disciplines this season, such as fasting, then do it unto the Lord, in firm confidence that your life is not sustained by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. And so this Lent feast upon the word of God as you fast.

Seek to grow deeper in your knowledge and understanding of the Word of God. Meditate upon the word grow your roots deeper into the soil of the word so you can receive greater nourishment in times of spiritual dryness. It is the Word of God which your true food, because it points to Jesus Christ who is the Bread of Life from heaven. So if you fast, let it be for this purpose. To taste and see that the Lord is good.

But I also have a word of warning for those of you who are going to pursue the discipline of fasting this season. Just as your life does not consist in eating, **neither does it consist in abstaining.** Do not abstain from food thinking that by doing so you are being more spiritual. Your spiritual life is not sustained by eating food, and neither is it sustained by not eating food. It is Gnostics who believe that abstaining from the good things of this world that God gave

us for our enjoyment and sustenance, is where spiritual wisdom is found.

Therefore, if you are person who does not usually observe the Lenten fasts, and you are hearing all this talk this time of year about fasting, then please be aware of the Devil's subtlety and designs.

Just as the Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose, so too can the Devil promote a spiritual discipline, for his purpose as well. Let say you do fast. Then what? You say, "I am going to fast this Lent, I am going to prove that I am a super spiritual Christian." Who are you proving that to? God? Jesus? Yourself? Or the Devil? For you can easily fall into the traps of the Devil by trying to prove how spiritual you are, for then you will falling into the preeminent sin of Pride.

For this is exactly the sin that the devil tried to get Christ to fall into when he tempted him to jump off the pinnacle of the temple.

You do not need to prove anything to anyone, and certainly not the Devil. God has already declared you to be a son of God in your baptism and by your faith in Jesus. And you remain a son by making God your refuge and fortress, not your spiritual discipline of fasting.

Why do you seek further confirmation for your acceptance in the beloved other than what the Father has already spoken over you? Is the Father's Word not sufficient enough for you? You are a son of God, so believe it by living by every word that comes from the mouth of God. And among those many words are the ones He spoke over you at Christ's baptism: *This is my well beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.*



As the saying goes: God said it. I believe it. That settles it.

God is very pleased with you, and this was before you had done anything good or bad. The Father chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world in love. Your acceptance by the Father was of pure grace, so that you do not have to earn God's favor by doing "super spiritual things", like fasting. Fasting is nothing if it is pursued for any false reason.

Asceticism, for the sake of asceticism, may indeed have an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion, Paul says in Colossians 2, but it is of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Instead, if you really desire to be spiritual, if you really want to be elevated to the Heavens, and have the corrupting influences of the world to lose their grip on you, then set your mind on Christ, who has elevated to the right hand of God. Set your mind on Heavenly things, and not on earthly things. For if you really want to be super spiritual and catch a glimpse of the glory that Christ will clothe you with at the resurrection, then do it this way:

*Put to death that which is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. You must also rid yourselves of anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips, and all lying.* These are things which make a person unspiritual, and keep a person from attaining the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven. But to eat food or not eat food, does nothing.

And if you want to be really spiritual, then *clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.* <sup>13</sup> *Bear with each*

other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

<sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the Word of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and Spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

These are things that make us spiritual or unspiritual. But to fast or not to fast, is nothing, if it is pursued for the wrong reason and in the wrong state of mind and heart. What Christ calls you to this Lent is cultivate a renewed desire to read and know and memorize the Word of God and to believe it, and to find in Jesus Christ everything you need to crush the serpents in you.

And so if you fast, let it be for that purpose, so you can spend more time in the Word of God, for you do not live by bread alone, but every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Amen.