

## Distance Learning

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Join with me in prayer. *O God open us up today. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts that we might feel, and then, O God open our hands so that we might serve. Amen*

I remember when I was a kid in middle school - in those days we called it junior high. All I wanted to do was to get through junior high, "Let me just get through junior high and get on to high school! That will be so awesome!" Then when I got to high school I thought, "If I can just get through my first two years so I can get a car. And once I get a car life will be awesome! So, if I can just get through these years, I'll be fine!" Then once I got to drive and had the family car I thought "If I can just get through high school and get off to college! Boy, things will be great then!"

What was happening was that I was just constantly in the business of thinking, "How can I get through this? How can I get through it?"

What I've found is that's what we're doing right now. We're just thinking to ourselves, "These are such difficult times. How can we ever get through it? How am I going to get through this challenge with this disease? How am I going to get through these economic times? How am I going to get through this isolation so I can just come back together and be with people?"

I want to change the question for just a minute, and move from "How can I get through this?" to "What can we learn from this? What is the lesson that we can receive from God during these challenging times? How will we be different people?"

We're talking about our kids now who are all doing "distance learning." I think that's the question we ought to ask ourselves. Are we doing any distance learning? Are we learning anything from being at a distance from one another through this time? I've heard it said, "Never waste a good crisis" so we're in a crisis right now which is the joining together of the word's danger and opportunity in the Chinese language. The characters for *danger* and for *opportunity* come together in the word *crisis*. We don't want to waste a good crisis. We want to take hold of the opportunity for learning with us.

We've been preaching on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. I want to take a Sunday off of that series and talk about the season of Lent. We're in the season of Lent, which is the time we remember, commemorate, Jesus' 40 days and nights in the wilderness. And at the end of which he was tempted by the devil. I want to ask us the question - what can we learn from those passages, from Jesus' time in the wilderness?

I saw one of these memes the other day that said, "I didn't mean to give up this much for Lent!" I think that's pretty funny because that's the truth. We didn't mean to give this much up but maybe there's something we can learn from this time. We are kind of in the wilderness, aren't we? And there's something we can learn from that.

The passage I want to deal with is found in the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of Matthew. Let me just say something about the gospel of Matthew. It's the Jewish Gospel and its primary purpose is to present Christianity as the completion of, as the new Judaism. That you don't leave Judaism to become a Christian but rather Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism.

This is a passage that really focuses on Jesus as the new Moses. If any of the Jewish readers or hearers of this Gospel when they learned of Jesus' 40 days and nights in the wilderness, they'd immediately think of Moses' 40 days and nights on the mountain, and the people of Israel wandering for 40 years in the wilderness. And that would be in their minds, so this passage when it's read in the context of that, and three times it quotes the book of Deuteronomy which is a retelling of Moses receiving the law on the mountain. And what had happened to the children of Israel.

We're going to look at this together and see what it is that Jesus understood in his time in the wilderness that the children of Israel had to learn the hard way.

We're going to start with the beginning of Matthew 4 in verses 1-4. Let me read it to you. "And Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, it is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

This first temptation we learn to trust in God's provision. To trust in God's provision. When Jesus quotes the Scripture, he's quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, and I want to read you the actual passage he's quoting: It's in Deut. 8:2-3 and he's speaking of God. It says, "He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor

your ancestors were acquainted with, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

You know in this time of economic challenges we cry out "How are we going to get by? What about us? How are we going to survive?"

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to go to Guatemala with a team from St. Luke's with Zoe Ministry. It was a marvelous trip. The whole point of Zoe Ministries is to empower young people - teenagers really - to start businesses and to be able to support their families. It's an empowerment ministry, a wonderful ministry that's now all over the world. And St. Luke's helped them plant it in Guatemala.

While we were there there was a boy who Zoe had provided a chicken. He had continued to add to that number of chickens. When the chickens would hatch chicks, he'd raise those chicks. He had 23 chickens and he and his *compadres*, his work team from Zoe, started a restaurant as well. They had a 12-seat restaurant and St. Luke's continues to support that restaurant.

In conversation with this boy, who was a marvelous kid, I asked him, "Where did you get the chickens?" I was ready for him to give a great plug for Zoe and say, "Well, Zoe gave it to us." But he said, "God provides. God provided the chicken." And I thought, "Wow - he gets it!" And I wonder to myself if I think of that often enough. So, whether it's one or 23 or thousands of chickens, whether you live in a hut or a mansion, whether you're going from 1000 chickens down to 23 chickens in this time. I wonder if your basic response is "God provides." He fed the children of Israel the manna in the wilderness, and he'll feed us, too. And we hold fast to that trust in God's provision.

Now Jesus really pushed it beyond that. He said, "humans really need food" and of course we need food, we need physical food. But then he said, "But not only food. We need spiritual food as well."

What I've found during this time is that so many people when I talk to them there are the emotions in them of fear, and anger and worry. But they're searching for something to anchor them in this time. Something to sort of not just feed their bodies but feed and support their souls. That's the work of the church - that's why we do what we do.

I remember a number of years ago when we had a time of fasting. We were doing a series on the Holy Spirit and we challenged people to fast. And in learning about fasting we talked to Billy Abraham who is a professor at Perkins School of Theology, and he had this great phrase. During Lent we fast often and why do we do that? And here's how he explained it. He said,

“Because it's a way of saying to ourselves as we fast, as much as I hunger for food right now...” when we feel that gnawing within us “...as much as I hunger for food, even more I hunger for the Holy Spirit. Even more do I long to be filled with the Spirit of God, to have the Word of God sustain me in a challenging time.”

So, in this time we learn about God's provision, both physically and spiritually.

Let's move on, continuing with verse 5: "Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'”

We have to learn to have faith in God's protection - that's what this temptation's about. We just have to believe and have faith that God will protect us. But we don't test God. So, this is what this is about. He's quoting again the book of Deuteronomy, in Deuteronomy 6:16, where it says "Do not put the Lord your God to the test as you did at Massah..."

Now what happened at Massah? That was the place where they had already come through the Red Sea, they'd been in the desert and they came to the place where they were so thirsty. They began to say, "Why are we out here? Look, God, we did what you told us to do and now you're going to leave us out here in the desert."

They viewed their relationship with God as contractual - as transactional, "Look, God, we'll do what you tell us to do and you have to take care of us. You have to protect us. And as long as you're protecting us, we're with you, but if we sense you're not protecting us we're not with you anymore."

That's a sense of testing. Sometimes that's how we believe that our relationship should be. We say to ourselves, “God, I've been a good guy. I treat other people ethically, I have compassion on people, I go to church every Sunday. I go to Sunday school; I teach Sunday school. I'm generous with all sorts of non-profits and I give 10% of my income to the church. I do all sorts of work in the community. I pray and I read my Bible. I do all the stuff I'm supposed to. Yet I'm not protected. You said that if I would do right you would protect me." And that's how we view faith.

That's not faith. Faith is believing what we do not see.

I used to have this little deal I'd do with my kids when they were small. It was nighttime and they were going to bed or in the morning when they were heading off to school. I'd say, "Did you brush your teeth?" And they'd say, "Yes, I brushed my teeth." And I'd say, "All right now, I'm going to go upstairs and check your toothbrush and see if it's wet. So, tell me the truth, did you brush your teeth?" And they'd say, "You don't believe me?" I'd say, "Yes, I believe you but I'm going to check your toothbrush." It was a sort of trust but verify mindset. Friends, that's not faith. My kids would say, "Well, if you're going to check my toothbrush then you don't really believe me, do you?" And I think that's how it is when God looks at us and asks, "You're testing me? If you think faith is this transaction, we have between us, then you don't really understand faith. No, I love you and you need to believe I love you."

What we have to understand is that this sense of protection is just this basic belief that God is for us. And that the most important thing, the very presence of God in our lives, nothing can take away - nothing.

At times when we have a memorial service, when it's clear that we've prayed for someone to be healed in a physical way and it doesn't happen then we're at a loss. It's interesting, we often read this passage from Romans and I suspect you'll be familiar with it. It in Romans 8:35-39. It says, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?...No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...For I am convinced that neither death, nor life nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Friends, not corona virus, not economic decline, not isolation, not even death can separate us from the love of God. We count on that presence of God to hold us in the palm of his hand.

Now let's look at the third temptation. We learn to trust in the provision of God and have faith in the protection of God. The Scripture says, "Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! For it is written, Worship the Lord your God and only serve him.'"

The third thing we have to learn is to walk with Jesus in his passion. We have provision, protection and now passion.

The word *passion* is an interesting word. We think of it as a strong emotion, which it is, but the archaic use of the word, which is now generally obsolete means *suffering*. That's why we call the last week of Jesus' life sometimes Holy Week but also Passion Week. Many of you have seen the movie, "The Passion of the Christ." It has to do with suffering, it means to suffer. And what this temptation is that Satan was saying to Jesus was, "Look, you can have the kingdom without the cross. You can have the destination without the journey. You can have the victory without the struggle."

Look, in the Kingdom of God you don't get the kingdom by bowing down to Satan. You get the kingdom by giving your life away on the cross.

In my office I have this little gizmo and it is an "easy button." That's what a lot of us want. We think, "Look, I'm going to have faith in Christ, things are going to go well!" Then I press the "easy button" and the voice from it says, "That was easy!" I love this little thing. People will come in with all sorts of challenges and I'll say, "Let's just fix that!" And I press the button and it responds, "That was easy." That's what we're looking for, this easy answer. But that's not the way of the cross. That's not the way of Jesus. To live and love like Jesus is not a faith of easy answers.

When I was a kid and had first come to Christ in my teens, I was involved in the youth group, and we'd sing, "Do, Lord." You probably remember it - it goes, "Do, Lord, oh, do, Lord, do remember me?" And one of the verses went, "You can't wear the crown if you don't bear the cross. You can't wear the crown if you don't bear the cross."

The journey of Jesus is through Good Friday. It goes to Easter, but it goes through Good Friday.

Tom Long is one of my favorite preachers and commentators. He came and preached in our Shamblin Lecture at one time. Let me read what he says about this third temptation, He says. "The church faces the same temptation today when it attempts to find some easier and quicker road to travel than the way of the cross. Whenever the power of positive thinking gets substituted for the power of sacrificial love and costly grace, then the tempter smiles. Whenever we bow down to that which is not God to nation or race or family or politics or tribe or social standing, hoping that this will fill our hearts, we succumb to this temptation. Whenever we attempt to soften the cost of discipleship and pretend that the work of Christ does not involve suffering, we take on the role of the tempter."

When this is all done, we will have been walking on that road with Jesus - the road of his passion. We'll walk on it through Holy Week but through this time when we're in the wilderness it's where we'll be shaped by the challenges and difficulties that we go through together. And we'll be changed. We'll be different. We'll have learned, as much as we would love for there to be an easy answer, and we're tempted to look for one, that's not the way of the cross.

Tina Throckmorton is one of our wonderful choir members and she sent me an email this week. She was saying that during the service last week when she was listening, she was coloring. Let me read a part of the email she sent: "Tom - wanted to share with you my coloring therapy that I completed during virtual church last Sunday. This is from that classic the "Dolly Parton Coloring Book." Then there's a little "smiley face." ...She's pretty darn wise though. It says *Storms make trees take deeper roots.*" Storms make trees take deeper roots.

This storm, this wilderness we're in will help us to put our roots down deeper into that which is spiritually substantive where we will root ourselves in the Word of God in a whole different way. This is that time that we talked about a few weeks ago when we talked about Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He says, "I don't want to do this, God. I don't want to go to the cross. But not what I want, but what you want. Not my will but your will."

So that's what we'll do, and we'll claim that.

Now one more thing. I don't want us to miss the last verse. "Then the devil left him and suddenly angels came and waited on him." (Matt. 4:11) The angels came and ministered to him.

Friends, we're not going to short cut this process, we're going to go through it. We're not going to go around it, we're not going to go under it, we're not going to go over it, we're going to go through it. And as we go through it, we're going to learn, we're going to shaped and formed by it. We're going to learn the things that the Children of Israel learned in the wilderness that Jesus already knew when he was in his wilderness time. But in the end, on the other side of it, the angels are there. And I'm counting on it.

Let's pray together. *God, you are right in the midst of all of this, using it to teach us. In this teach us to trust in your provision. And to give us both bread and provision of the anchor of your Word. Teach us to have real faith in your protection, believing without testing that you are there for us and not against us. Teach us to walk with your Son Jesus through his passion, not looking for an easy answer but willing to go through Good Friday to get to Easter Sunday morning. In the name of the one who came to be with us through all of it, Jesus Christ. Amen.*