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Desert Trials

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Readings: Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

As the Church begins her Lenten journey, these readings present the theme of “trials” or “testings.” In the scriptures, a trial reveals and even strengthens a person’s fidelity, courage, or honor, while also humbling those who fail the tests. Thus, the *Book of Sirach* states that, “[w]hen you gain a friend, gain him through testing, and do not trust him hastily” (Sir 6:7). God tests the fidelity of Abraham when he calls for the binding of Isaac, and God acknowledges Abraham’s fidelity by proclaiming, “I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore” (Gen 22:1-19). Most of all, the Church recalls today the trials of the Israelites during their forty years of wandering in the desert. God explained the purpose of these trials in *The Book of Deuteronomy*: “And you shall remember all the ways which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments” (Deut 8:2). Trials, therefore, form persons and communities in their fidelity and obedience to God, lay bare the weaknesses that require correction, and humble hearts for the reception of God’s grace and healing.

The Trial of Adam and Eve

Adam and Eve underwent their trial in a state of perfect integrity, free of the scars of sin. Thus, St. Paul could call Adam “the type of the one who was to come,” since he anticipated the unfallen humanity assumed by Christ in the Incarnation. This also meant that Adam and Eve, as unfallen humanity, included all future humanity within a trial of fidelity and the proper use of freedom.

The tempter, the serpent, demonstrates remarkable cunning and subtlety in his questioning of Eve. The serpent’s first question is a subtle lie that casts God as a tyrannical nay-sayer: “Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?” In reality, God gave Adam and Eve free reign in the garden, with the one prohibition of eating from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:16-17). Eve is lured into the serpent’s trap, when she says, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die.’” God never said anything about touching the tree! Thus, though Eve admits that

she and Adam could pluck fruit from the other trees, she adds a detail to God's prohibition that indicates her own shifting view of God's authority: God is a tyrant who inhibits man's freedom.

The serpent then strikes his final blow: "You certainly will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is evil." Leon Kass unmasks the serpent's strategy: "In one short speech, the serpent manages both to impugn God's veracity and His motives and to provide the inducement for disobeying Him. By insisting, 'You won't die,' the serpent implies that God is a liar. By offering reasons for what God said—implicitly claiming, as reason frequently does, to know more than what is at the surface of things—he goes behind God's explicit words to expose (so he thinks) their hidden meaning and motive" (Leon Cass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, p. 85). His words clearly distort the truth, but his earlier questions had already weakened Eve's resolve. The serpent, the tester, was about to achieve success.

Eve, and subsequently Adam, succumb to the desire "to be like gods," and a new trial enters—death. The Eastern Fathers of the Church often defined death as "alienation" (*allogriotēs*), that is, separation from God and neighbor. The physical dimension of death, with all its pain and horror, paled in comparison with its power to separate persons from communion. Such was the state of Original Sin, in which human beings found themselves divided from one another—Adam and Eve had to hide themselves in loincloths—and were closed from full communion with God. Death, however, became the trial that, though a condign punishment for disobedience, could also *awaken* human beings to their plight and their need for salvation. Death could remind them of their longing for the love of communion with one another and with the Creator.

The Trials of Christ in the Desert

The Holy Spirit leads Christ into the desert to undergo trials. Thus, Jesus recapitulates Israel's forty years of wandering but undergoes trials in obedience to the Spirit: his life always reveals his eternal "yes" to the Father. Though not his final test, the "trial" of the Cross, Jesus nonetheless begins his public ministry confronting the Adversary, the Tempter or Trial-Giver (*peirazōn*). Jesus, unlike Israel, will pass the tests and demonstrate his fidelity and love for both the Father and all humanity.

The biblical scholar Daniel Harrington, S.J., notes how Jesus' trials come from lies that Jesus will later overturn with greater truths. First, the tempter suggests that he turn stones into bread, that is, that what cannot nourish us—rocks—become our food. Thus, this trial represents all the occasions when human beings seek their nourishment in false places—wealth, fame, empty diversions. Jesus rejects this false suggestion, and later shatters it with his greatest gift: his very flesh and blood as our food. The Eucharist satisfies humanity's deepest desire: the end of alienation, the communion that comes to its fruition in the eternal Eucharistic Feast in God.

The tempter begins the next trial with the words, "If you are the Son of God . . ." The question seeds doubt and demands confirmation. Jesus, however, refuses to establish his identity with a pointless display. All his miracles would be "signs" that point to the Truth, not empty spectacles. The Father alone revealed his identity in the Baptism and would do so again in the Transfiguration: "This is *my beloved Son*, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17; Matt 17:5). And the final revelation of his Sonship would emerge from the Paschal Mystery: the Risen Jesus, the Son of God who ascends to the right hand of the Father.

The trials conclude with the question of worship. The Tempter, ever a pathetic parody of the Creator, asks Jesus to worship him. Jesus spurns such an absurd offer, casting the demon out: "Get away, Satan!" Worshiping anyone or anything other than God means only death—the alienation from the one source of love and life. Once again, Jesus reveals the Truth that crushes the lie. In the conclusion to the Gospel, the Risen Jesus appears to his disciples: "And when they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." All worshiped Jesus as God, including the doubters who were undergoing their own trials. This marked a true victory over the Tempter: true worship of the one Lord and Savior!

During Lent, we meet the trials of the desert together, strengthened by the Spirit. We come to the Eucharist for our food; we acknowledge the true identity of Jesus as the Son of God by reinvigorating our witness as Christians; we worship Jesus as our one true Lord in the celebration of the Eucharist and in our prayer. In turn, we examine the ways in which the world entices us away from true worship and practice, assuming those exercises that will reorient our lives. These trials may reveal our weaknesses that need healing in confession; they may humble us and open us to God's grace. Most of all, they will bring us into communion with one another and God—the communion that is the antithesis of death. We live in the days of hope: death's reign has ended, as we now live in Christ.

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For Further Reading

John Grondelski, [“The Temptation in the Desert”](#)

Daniel Harrington, S.J., [The Gospel of Matthew](#)

Leon Kass, [The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis](#)

In Short . . .

- ***Trials form persons and communities in their fidelity and obedience to God, lay bare the weaknesses that require correction, and humble hearts for the reception of God's grace and healing.***
- ***Eve and Adam succumbed to the desire “to be like gods,” and a new trial entered—death.***
- ***The Eastern Fathers of the Church often defined death as “alienation” (allotriotēs), that is, separation from God and neighbor.***
- ***Jesus recapitulates the Israelites' forty years of wandering, but undergoes trials in obedience to the Spirit: his life always reveals his eternal “yes” to the Father.***