

Letters to Liam, No. 2: Temptation and Redemption

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The 1st Sunday in Lent
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Dt 26.1-11; Ps 91.1-13; Rom 10.8b-13; Lk 4.1-13

CCT: Jesus Christ is our fortress and refuge, the One in whom we trust for salvation and life.

"Liam" is a literary creation, a conflation of many young people I know. The name means "warrior," "of strong will." He is a college student, 21, intelligent, hard-working, charismatic, experimenting in many ways. He was raised in Christ, but there was a lot of trouble and some dysfunction in his family. He is challenged by the Word of Christ and by the influence of his peers and the world. Most of the names and events described in these pastoral letter/sermons for the Sundays in Lent are either fictionalized, a conflation, or have been significantly revised to protect the identities of those involved. —Rev. Lance A. O'Donnell

Readings: Dt 26.1-11; Ps 91.1-13; Rom 10.8b-13; Lk 4.1-13

" . . . Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." (2 Timothy 1:2, ESV)

Dear Liam,

We are tempted to interpret everything primarily through the lens of our own personal experience. We interpret our friends' problems that way. We interpret regulations and laws that way. We interpret the U.S. Constitution that way. And we interpret the Bible that way. Understanding everything through our own lens comes "naturally."

Here's the problem: how many times—even in your own relatively young life—have you interpreted something through the lens of your experience... and then found out later that you were "off" or even flat-out wrong? We *have* to interpret in order to live, but even a non-religious

perspective on maturity would call us to accept our own unreliability.

One might say, "That's obvious!" or as your generation likes to say, "OK, Boomer," (I'm a Gen-Xer, by the way :)) but then we go ahead and do it anyway. We acknowledge that our perception is flawed... and then we go out and act like it's not. When some "news" starts out on social media, for example, how many people get the facts and check the context before commenting? Very few. We see through world through our own eyes. It is the "natural" thing for us... and then we try to bend the world to our will, often to the detriment of ourselves and others.

At the very heart of the challenge that Christ sets before us is a challenge of authority. Christ calls us to see the frailty of our nature, and the very real danger posed by our natural inclination to individual autonomy. Christ calls us to see our own hypocrisy. Even just biologically, we don't come into the world autonomous and we can't live that way. We are brought into the world, and are sustained in the world, by forces outside of us. And yet, like a toddler, we kick back against even the idea of outside authority.

Part of Christ's challenge to me "back in the day" (and every day since, to be frank) was to acknowledge that by acting as if I was the center of the universe, the source of being and authority, like I was the repository of truth, I had done nothing but bring trouble upon myself and others. *That which is the source of being and authority is, by definition, "God."* And the fact of the matter, then, is that we all have a "god." Our natural inclination is to have ourselves as that god... and since we are "god" we try to bend everything—and everyone—to our will. Everyone does it. Everyone. Presidents. Czars. Domestic servants. Pastors. College students. Everyone.

If even our own experience shows us that we are not the source of being and authority—that we are not God—then are we not compelled to search for God, to know God, and

be known by God? Are we not—if only to be intellectually honest—compelled to submit to an authority outside ourselves?

With this acknowledgment as our backdrop, Cousin Liam, I share with you some meditation on the account of Jesus' temptation in Luke 4...

Temptation and Redemption

Satan's temptation of Jesus was a challenge of authority.... and a challenge of purpose.

To be fair to the Bible, those involved in this account—namely, Satan and Jesus—should be understood by what the Bible itself says of them, not what extrabiblical sources say, whether those are ancient or modern. Satan is an angel; that is, he is a non-bodied creation of God called to serve God and the creation (Heb 1.14). At some point early in the time of the creation Satan rebelled against God and took legions of other angels along with him in the rebellion. A deeper discussion of the how and the why of all this may be for another time, but a brief summary is found with the account of the temptation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, where Satan says, "You will be like God." (Gen 3.5) Satan wanted to be God. He wasn't content with his position and authority.

As you know, Liam, because you were raised in this, the promise of a Savior to rescue the creation from sin and death goes all the way back to Genesis 3, to the aftermath of the "fall into sin," where the first humans, Adam and Eve, believed The Lie (that they could be God), rebelled against God, and brought upon themselves the calamity of sin and death with which we live to this day. As you know, God kept his promise at just the right time when the Eternal Son of God became a Man and was born, in fulfillment of prophecy, of the Virgin Mary.

Fast forward about 30 years to Luke 4, where we find Jesus as an adult. He had just been baptized (Lk 3.21-22) and God the Holy Spirit led Him out into the desert wilderness to continue the fulfillment of His purpose. For a moment, that takes us to the end of the story.

In Luke 24, after He was raised from the dead and before He ascended into heaven, “. . . [Jesus] said to [His disciples]

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”
(Luke 24:44–47, ESV)

It’s an astonishing and wonderful statement. What Jesus is saying is that

all of what we call the Old Testament is about Him, that He is God, and that all Scripture finds its fulfillment in His death and resurrection. That means, for example, that all the stuff about the creation and fall into sin in Genesis 1-3 finds its fulfillment in Him.

And Genesis 3 is the perfect backdrop to understand what’s going on—millenia later—with the temptation of Jesus in Luke 4. Genesis 3, of course, records Satan’s lie to Adam and Eve, their succumbing to that lie, and God speaking to all of them about the consequences. In the midst of that litany of consequences is one for Satan himself:

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15, NIV84)

How do you kill a snake? You crush its head. *Right there* in Genesis 3 is the Promise of a single descendent of the woman who will crush Satan's head. What we have then in Luke 4 is single warrior combat written on the grandest stage possible.

But the Great Combatant is not a teenage boy with a slingshot [David] or a stuttering old man with a staff [Moses], and Satan knows it. The Holy Spirit has led Him out to the battlefield, effectively saying to Satan, "Here He is, the Promised One." And the weapons they will fight with are not the weapons of the world. They will fight with words, Liam, and—as you are learning, words have power and a purpose. Words *convey*, they flow from authority. The question, as we will see, is "What authority?"

And the Devil swings first, "*IF* you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." (Lk 4.3) Will this Son of Adam cave like his forefather did in the Garden of Eden? Will He, like Esau (Gen 25), give up the purpose of His birthright for a loaf of bread? Will He accept the Father's will that He suffer for a time, or will He, like Moses at Meribah (Num 20), stretch the Word and act on His own? No, He will not! Jesus will not accept the false premise, the "if." He will not accept the lie. He will not countenance the doubt. He submits to the Father's will. He will not stretch the Word. "*And Jesus answered [Satan], 'It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.''"* (Luke 4:4, ESV)

And then the Devil took Jesus up and they looked upon all the kingdoms of the world: the mountains and fields, the oceans and rivers and all the people therein. It would have been an astounding sight, glorious and majestic. And Satan ". . . *said to him, 'To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'"* (Luke 4:6–7, ESV) More lies, Liam, and we know these lies, too. Anyone who has climbed into the skies in an airplane, witnessed the majesty of the Grand Canyon, hiked up a mountain, peered out over the vastness of the ocean,

seen the Mississippi flow. . . or gaped in wonder at the birth of child knows how glorious this world can be. Indeed, many of us—now and in centuries past—have worshipped the creation, have focused on this world. Yet, when we look closely we see that for all that beauty, everything is in decay. We spend billions and billions of dollars on “skin care” and working out—and, to be sure, caring for our bodies and our world is something that God calls us to do—but thirty years from now Kim Kardashian and Chris Hemsworth are going to be saggy old people. It happens to all of us. The world is in decay, and we’re part of it. To worship the creation is a fool’s errand, a lie, and still we all get sucked in by it...

Part of Jesus’ temptation here is, for the sake of beauty or power, to worship, to focus on this world rather than worship God. This second temptation in Luke 4 is absolutely fundamental because it is a temptation to: one, doubt God’s promise; and, two—like at the beginning—to worship the creature rather than the creator. And Jesus answer to Satan’s lie resounds: “. . . “It is written, “ ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’ ”” (Luke 4:8, ESV)

Finally, in Luke 4, Satan is desperate... but he is cunning. It is clear that This One, this Jesus, is unlike the “first Adam.” This One will not doubt the Word. He will not stretch the Word. Now, Satan knows the Word of God, and he knows all Scripture is fulfilled in Jesus. He laid doubt about the Word in Genesis 3, but here—given Who he’s up against—rather than make a hatchet swing with his sword of doubt, it’s much more subtle, like a scalpel, for he quotes Psalm 91:

“. . . “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, “ ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,’ and “ ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’ ”” (Luke 4:9b–11, ESV)

God became man to be the final sacrifice for sin. He must fulfill the Passover slaughter of the lamb, the lamb on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and the hundreds of other sacrifices of the Old Testament. He must *be killed*, not kill himself. Satan's third temptation in Luke 4 is a stretch of the word of galactically different character than Moses' doubt in Numbers 20 or Sarai's doubt in Genesis 16. It is Satan's attempt to circumvent the cross, where Jesus dies at the hand of Jews and Gentiles, thus of all people. And, it's another planting of doubt, as if to say, "Why don't you try this and see if it's acceptable? Die on your terms, not the Father's terms." As such, it's an attempt to drive division among the Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's "March Madness." The devil's got "onions." We'll give him that.

Jesus, of course, won't have anything to do with it. "*And Jesus answered him, 'It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'*" (Luke 4:12, ESV)

We, of course, know the end of the story. We know that Jesus does the Father's will at just the right time. Thousands upon thousands of people saw His miracles and had their lives changed by them. Hundreds of people saw the resurrected Jesus in the 40 days before His ascension into heaven. With Roman roads and the Jewish diaspora, there was a critical mass for the Church to fulfill Jesus' mandate that ". . . *repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*" (Luke 24:47, ESV)

And that brings this letter near to a close, Liam. When I was just a couple years older than you are, when my own arrogance forced me to find an authority outside myself, at first I recoiled at the humanity and vulnerability of Jesus. But the Word of Jesus has a way of getting to you. This account of His temptation is one of those for me. I did a lot of experimenting when I was in college. Some of it for the good; some it utter foolishness. When the consequences of my own actions forced me to look in the mirror, one of the

things that I saw in that mirror was Jesus' temptation and this related verse from Hebrews 4:

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15, ESV)

I'd encourage you to memorize that verse and meditate upon it, especially when you're struggling. That verse, over the years, has become a part of my daily life, for the Scripture says that ". . .everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:13, ESV) To "call on the Name" is to believe, to worship, to submit—as it were—to an authority outside yourself. To call on the Name of *Christ* is to call on One who actually knows the rabbit hole of thought or deed that you're going down. Stunningly, He knows what it's like to want to despise oneself or damage oneself. It's absolutely fascinating—and a marvel in comparison to other world religions—that in Christ we have a God who is both *transcendent*—outside us, the creator of the world—and *immanent*—one who knows us and is near; who knows our temptations and sins, and yet is "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." It still floors me that in Christ God completely forgives my guilt and covers my shame.

My prayer for both of us, Liam, is that, like our forefathers in the faith, we may learn to humbly acknowledge our struggles, trust in Christ, and return thanks for God's grace. (Dt. 26.1-11)

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, . . .guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7, ESV)

Your Cousin
Pastor Lance O'Donnell