

## **If You Fall Down**

February 29, 2023

### **Genesis 2:15-17 and 3:1-7**

<sup>15</sup> *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.* <sup>16</sup> *And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup> 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.”...*

<sup>1</sup> *Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”* <sup>2</sup> *The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup> but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’”* <sup>4</sup> *But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; <sup>5</sup> for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* <sup>6</sup> *So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. <sup>7</sup> Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.*

### **Matthew 4:1-11**

<sup>1</sup> *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”* <sup>4</sup> *But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> 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.’” <sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup> and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” <sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.



Welcome to the first Sunday in Lent! During the season of Lent, we are on a journey. A journey implies two things: movement and a destination. Lent is a time of considering

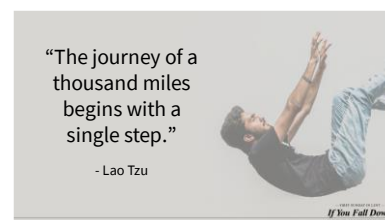
the state of our souls, of self-reflection, and of introspection. This is movement inward into our soul. During Lent our movement is also walking with Christ. This is movement outward into our world. On our journey we have a destination – two actually – one physical and one relational. We are on a path, walking with Jesus as he moves toward Jerusalem and toward the cross. We are also seeking to move to a new place into our relationship with Jesus. As we begin this time together, let us pray...

As we start, let's be honest: journeys are not always easy. Especially journeys that do not have a specific outcome. We are not walking or driving to a specific address. This journey does not have a finite time limit. Yes, Lent is 40 days long, plus Sundays.

Yes, we are moving towards the cross. But we will not be “finished” come April 2<sup>nd</sup>. We will not ever wake up one day to find ourselves to be the “perfect Christian.”

The journey we undertake is primarily internal. It is a work of the heart and soul. It is a refining and shaping process. So, there will likely be some pain along the way. There will probably be some sacrifice and some surrender. The journey to the cross and to a better and deeper relationship with Jesus will be laden with struggle. This journey is a wrestling match with our greatest foe: ourselves. Yes, this journey is an inner journey, at least in part. If we're being up front here, it is a journey we'd rather like to pass on, most of the time. We're adept at telling ourselves that we're fine, maybe even that we're good. We might even tell ourselves that if it weren't for everyone else, we'd be terrific.

Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” I know, pretty profound. But it is true. In terms of our Christian journey, perhaps we would rewrite it this way: “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single ~~step~~ stumble.” And then another and another and yet another stumble. This is how we learn to walk. As babies, we fall and fall and fall, again and again. And we get up and keep trying. Sometimes we cried. Sometimes we got frustrated. Sometimes the ground just seemed like a safer place, and we stayed there for a while. This is just like our Christian journey. We fall down. We cry, we get frustrated, we withdraw to what feels like a safer place.



But any journey that takes us somewhere significant is going to include at least a few stumbles. Turn with me to Genesis 2 as we explore the original stumble in this epic storyline. We pick up the story in the Garden of Eden as



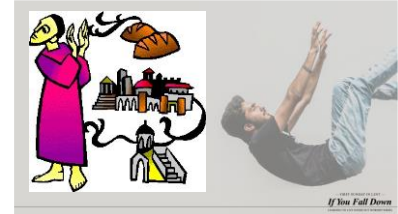
God tells Adam, *“You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”* God is pretty clear with Adam. In the next verses God decides that Adam needs a helper, or a partner, and Eve is created. Turning to chapter 3, they meet the serpent. The serpent is described as *“more crafty than any other wild animal.”* Telling Eve that God is wrong – *“you will not die”* – the serpent begins to tempt Eve. And, yes, Adam is right there too. The lie is this: *“You will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

The dangling fruit looks mighty good to Adam and Eve. The thought of being like God, hmm... They take a bite. They stumble. They fall down. The moment the bite is taken, their eyes are opened, and they realize that they are naked. In a panic, they sew together some clothes from fig leaves. In the next verses, as God walks in the garden, we find Adam and Eve hiding from God. As they once again interact with God, the blame game begins in earnest. This is a familiar story line for us too, isn't it? I touched on that earlier - if it weren't for everyone else, we'd be terrific. So, what do we do when we fall like this? Either we get up and continue the journey or we decide that maybe the journey is not worth it.

Some folks say, “Why bother? If the journey is too great to ever succeed, to ever be finished, then why take it?”

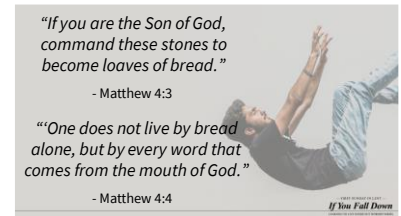
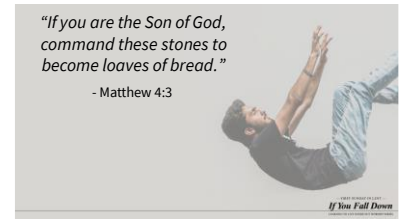


Others ask, “If I’m going to fall down again and again, if I’m going to fail over and over, why even set out?” And still others think, “If this is going to be painful and hard and challenging, no thanks.” Even more think, “The low-lying fruit looks good and seems pretty easy to grab. I’ll just take some of that.” So, friends, really, who would sign up for just such a journey? Who wants to wrestle with self pretty much non-stop, who wants to surrender and to sacrifice and then to experience transformation? Who does that? Well, turn with me to Matthew 4 to look into the example of one who does just that.

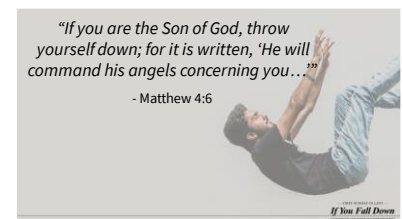


As we begin, we see that maybe this was not a totally volunteer choice. In our passage it says that Jesus was “*led up*” by the Spirit into the wilderness. In Mark’s gospel, the Spirit “*drives*” Jesus into the wilderness. You know, at least some of the time when I’ve done the hard inner work of the soul, it has not been by my choice either. I’d guess that is your experience too. I would wager that Jesus had an idea of what lay ahead. He probably also knew it was a journey that he had to take and that it was a journey that was worth taking. Jesus’ time in the wilderness begins with 40 days of fasting and prayer. At the end of verse 2 we read, “*He was famished.*” While obvious, it is also an important detail to the story. It is a great counter-point to Adam and Eve’s situation. They ate from the forbidden tree while literally surrounded by tree after tree after tree loaded with the best fruit ever.

It is when Jesus is in this weakened state, at least physically, that the tempter comes to him. Being famished, Satan begins by saying, *“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”* Jesus has fasted for 40 days. Satan appeals to Jesus’ physical needs at that moment. Satan is good at finding the right button to push. When we are feeling down about ourselves, the temptations are the things that we think might make us feel better. When we’ve had a bad day, we are tempted to turn to something that might relieve that pain. Famished Jesus? How about turning some stones into bread? Simple little task for you Jesus, O Son of God. Quoting from Deuteronomy 8, Jesus replies, *“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”* Score 1 for Jesus!



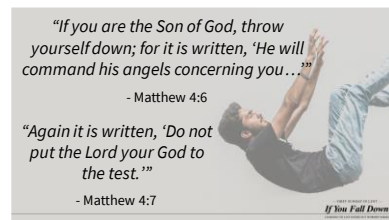
Not deterred yet, Satan then takes Jesus to the highest point on the temple and says to him, *“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”* Down 1-0 on the scoreboard, Satan ups his game here. Jesus rebutted his opening temptation by quoting scripture. So, Satan used scripture in this temptation, quoting from Psalm 91 himself. Satan is crafty.



He will whisper half-truths into our hearts too. Satan will twist scripture around, telling us things like, if God really loved you, then would God let this happen? If God is good, how does this or that evil exist? When we are teetering with our faith, the tempter will try and say whatever it takes to have us cave in, to have us just give up the good fight. Jesus returns the favor, quoting from Deuteronomy 6 this time, saying,

*“Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”*

Score another one for Jesus. 2-0!



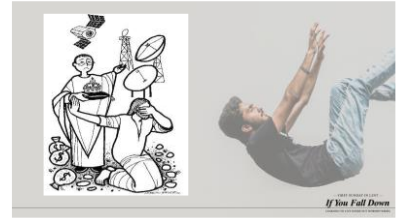
Still not giving up, Satan takes Jesus to a very high mountain. From this vantage point he shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world – and their splendor. Power and wealth are dangled before Jesus. Satan says to him, *“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”* Small price to pay for all this, Jesus. Satan tells us these lies too. Just cut this little corner and that big deal will be yours. Just do this one thing and that promotion will just fall into your lap. Just step on this person on your way up the ladder and you’ll get the power you really deserve. Just bow down to this one idol, my friend, and this can all be yours. Satan can really play dirty. *“More crafty than any other wild animal”* – that was the quote, right?



Jesus is up for this challenge too. Turning once again to Deuteronomy 6, Jesus first tells Satan that he is done with his tricks and then he hits Satan with this: *“Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”* Giving up for just a while, Satan leaves and the angels come and wait on Jesus’ needs. The tempter will be back.



In each and every temptation, Jesus fell back on the word of God. Now, while we may not be able to quote scripture left and right, we can recall the promises of God when Satan starts slinging arrows our way. Now, Jesus' journey into the wilderness of Judea is not the same as our journey into the wilderness of this world. We will never be able to turn stones into bread. But we do try to fill all sorts of hungers with all sorts of things. We will never be able to leap off a building expecting God to send angels to rescue us on the way down. But we do leap into bad habits and other destructive behaviors that sure seem like we are testing God. We will never have it in our ability or even in our grasp to rule all the kingdoms of the world. But we often believe that we do deserve everything, and we can quickly justify ourselves concerning the means we choose to attain the desires of our hearts.



We are not Jesus, so we fall down over and over. And the painful realization that we come to at some point is this: our journey is not just for the 40 days of Lent. It is for our whole life. Every day we are given opportunities to claim the gift of life that Jesus offers. And every day we face our own temptations, our own selfishness. Instead of always surrendering to the cross of Jesus, we sometimes stumble and fall. We wrestle with the great adversary inside of us, our own human will. Yet we do not wrestle alone. The fight is not ours alone.

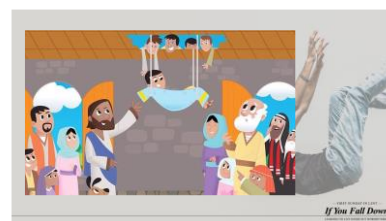
Turn with me to Romans 5, our Epistle reading for this week, to hear one of the great promises of God. Here we connect to today's temptation in the wilderness, back to the stumble of Adam and Eve, and back to Ash Wednesday too.



In verse 12 we connect back to the garden as we read, *“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.”* Sin came into the world. It is here. It is a part of all of our lives. Then, in verse 19 we read, *“For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”* Yes, Adam and Eve brought sin into the world. But, through Jesus’ obedience to death on a cross, the price has been paid. Through his blood we are made righteous. Hallelujah!

There is better news yet. Right there in the middle of our passage. Look at verse 15: *“But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.”* Grace and forgiveness are the free gift of God – available anytime to you and to me. It is not just that. Through Christ all can be forgiven and freed. Grace abounds for all people. Now that deserves a hallelujah and an amen!

In our readings from Luke this week we find the story of a man who received the free gift of grace from Jesus. In Luke 5 Jesus meets a paralytic, a man who fell down often. As we pick up the story in verse 17, we see that there are some Pharisees there that day. They are keeping an eye on Jesus. In that same verse we learn that the power to heal was with Jesus. Maybe that is why there is a big crowd that day. Some friends really want to get their friend to Jesus, so they make a hole in the roof and lower the man down.



Noting the men's faith and the paralytic's faith, Jesus says to the paralyzed man, *"Friend, your sins are forgiven."* It is an odd thing to say, isn't it? Being paralyzed seems to be the man's main issue. If I were the man, I think I would've chosen to be healed if I had a choice.

The scribes and Pharisees begin to question Jesus' authority to proclaim the forgiveness of sins. To them, this is blasphemy. God alone can forgive sins. Perceiving their questions, Jesus asks them, *"Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say, 'Stand up and walk?'"* Tough question, huh? Anyone can say your sins are forgiven. To show the religious leaders that he does have the power to forgive sins, Jesus then invites the man to *"Stand up and take your bed and go to your home."* Healed of his illness, the man walks out of the house as the crowd glorifies God for what they have witnessed.

In Matthew's gospel we saw that Jesus can stand against Satan's temptations. He gave us a model to follow. He showed us how to rely on the word of God in our own battles with evil. In Romans, we see that Christ has defeated the power of sin. He offers us new life. In Luke's passage we see that Jesus can heal us as he forgives our sins. What a savior we have.

My friends, we are invited to stand in the arms of the one who can stand against the evils of this world. And when we fall down, which we will do, Jesus is right there, hand extended, ready to help us up and ready to get us back on the path – or to catch us as we free-fall like this man.



Yes, the journey that feels like a thousand miles does begin with a single step. That first step is most successful when taken holding the hand of the man that knew the way to the cross, that knew the cost, and walked the road anyway. The journey to the cross may be hard and painful and challenging. But it is worth the journey. Jesus invites us to walk with him during the season of Lent and beyond. May we do so – all the way to the cross. Amen and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. As you have matured in faith, what new temptations have you encountered in your life?
- 2) *Pray*. Who do you know that falls for Satan's tricks and lies? Cover them in prayer this week.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 6:27-36. How do these words of Jesus change how you might look at someone you know who is really struggling with temptation or sin?