

The two sides stood, each on its mountain, with the valley in between them. Both armies were drawn up into battle lines, tensed and ready for a fight. For days, both sides had watched as the champion came forward. He taunted the other side; he mocked them and their God. He challenged any one of them to fight him, one on one, and settle things that way. Let's spare the bloodshed of all of us fighting, he said: I'll fight for my side; you send one man to fight for your side. If I lose, we will be your servants; if I win, you will be our servants. The champion's challenge is not met; none dares to fight this giant of a man. Finally, a challenger is found. He is not a soldier; he is a boy. He is there only as a messenger, but he goes forward to fight. Armed not with shield or sword; bearing a sling and a few stones, the boy goes forward into combat.

And now, the two sides lean forward a little further. Now the tension is at its peak. Who will win this fight? Who will prevail? For the soldiers watching, this battle means everything. Their lives hang in the balance; each side's freedom or enslavement rests in the hands of its champion. The outcome of the battle decides the fate of ALL those present, not just the two engaged in combat.

Those two champions, drawing near for the fight, are David and Goliath. You know how it ends—David strikes down Goliath with his sling and stone and kills him with his own sword. The battle is more than just a victory for David; it is a victory for Israel. The terms were clear—by defeating Goliath, David won the victory for all of Israel, freeing them from slavery and oppression; defeating their enemy. Israel owed its freedom to David, their champion.

That is the type of battle we see in today's Gospel. In this battle, more is at stake than just the two combatants. The fate of mankind hangs in the balance. The two champions—Jesus and Satan—do battle not just for personal pride or glory, but for mankind. We watch then

eagerly, pulling for our champion, praying that Jesus emerges victorious. We watch the battle, knowing that OUR LIVES hang in the balance; they are held in the hands of our champion, Jesus.

And what champions they are! On the one side is Satan, the deceiver, the liar, slick and sly and crafty. On the other side is Christ, strong in the Word of the Lord. There is Satan, his victory over Adam and Eve on display to showcase his might. He led this world into sin—no mean feat, to trick man into exchanging the paradise of Eden for a world scarred by death. Here is Christ, the one who made Adam and Eve before Satan could deceive them. These two champions are those who have made and shaped our world. Christ who created it; Satan who brought sin into it and corrupted it. Look around; you see the results of their work all around you. Now they meet on the field of battle; now they come together to fight for mankind.

The fight is waged over sin: will Satan lead Christ into sin? Will Christ resist temptation and remain pure and unspotted? The first round deals with the bad things in life. You have no food! Satan says. What kind of Son of God are you? What kind of God do you have? One who leaves you in the wilderness to starve? Your God is not providing for you—take matters into your own hands. Speak; turn these stones to bread, and EAT! A slick temptation—one that had worked before. The children of Israel in the wilderness were tricked by it. They grumbled that the Lord had led them into the wilderness to starve to death; they quickly forgot their Lord and His care and rebelled against Him. Now, once again in the wilderness, the same temptation is brought to Jesus.

But Christ sees beyond bread to more important matters. “Man shall not live by bread alone,” Jesus says. He quotes Scripture. He points to the Word of God, that reminds us there is more to life than a full stomach. Man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God;

this Word brings us our true and eternal life in Christ; bread can only sustain this earthly life for a time. Christ will not forsake the greater, eternal life, by doubting His Father's love and care, in exchange for a full stomach. His trust remains unshaken; He knows that He was not led into the wilderness to starve. Round one goes to Jesus.

Round two: the splendor of this world! Look; says Satan; see the glories of this world. All the kingdoms—all the power and glory and wealth of this world—are shown to Jesus. All this could be yours! Satan tells Him. And for such little cost. If you but worship me; if you but bow your knee once to me, all this is yours. A tempting offer—one that had worked before. Satan dangled the promise of a better life before Eve, and it worked. She forsook her Creator and listened instead to the serpent, to Satan. She grasped at power and glory and wisdom only to lose the gifts she had from God, the gift of being His beloved daughter.

Christ will not be so easily enticed. It is written, He says: You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve. Christ places His confidence in the Father, knowing that He would give Christ all authority—in heaven AND on earth. This would come in due time; after the cross and suffering. Satan cannot offer this; His promise of authority in this world amounts to a few gaudy trinkets—they look nice, but are of no real, lasting value. Christ sees this; He will not exchange His heavenly Father for a deceptive Satan, bent on destroying and harming Him. Round two goes to Jesus.

Round three: the twisting of God's Word. Here Satan poses as God; Here He tries to play Jesus' own game against Him. Twice He was bested by the Word of God, spoken by Jesus. Now He twists that Word to His own ends. Satan argues, If you are the Son of God, then surely God must be watching over you! He's promised to do so—here's the verse to prove it: He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you; on their hands they will bear you up, lest you

strike your foot against a stone. So, throw yourself down from this height; leap from the top of the temple. God will catch you! His angels will act like parachutes and guide you safely to earth. Or do you doubt God's Word? Do you not believe His promise?

A subtle temptation; Satan omits just four words from the verse, and changes its meaning completely. God's promise is to guard you—to guard you in all your ways! That is, as you walk as God's child, not tempting Him, not looking for harm so you can prove His care; as you walk in THE WAY that His Word shows us—then he will protect and guard you. Were Christ to step OUT of this way; were Christ to put God to the test, the promise would be forfeited. This too had worked before; God's Word had been twisted enough to lead the entire people of Israel into idolatry; they were lulled into complacency by Satan's subtle twisting of God's Word.

But it will not work on Jesus. He will not put the Lord His God to the test. He will not twist Scripture to meet His own ideas; He will not fall for Satan's twisting of God's Word. Round three goes to Jesus. And the battle is over. Behold! Your champion wins! The one fighting FOR YOU; the one fighting to DELIVER YOU, wins. Your life is saved. You are delivered from bondage to Satan, to sin, to death. You are set free, forgiven, granted life without end in Christ.

This battle over, the war will continue. Satan leaves Jesus, but only until an opportune time. Jesus remains faithful and obedient—in the wilderness, and every step of the way to the cross. He will not be pulled from His way, the way that the Father prepared for Him and sent Him on. He does battle until Satan is defeated, crushed beneath the cross of Calvary, smashed underneath an empty tomb. And so YOUR champion wins; your life is won for you.

Note carefully how your Lord fights in the battle; for here is our way to defeat Satan; here is warning of how Satan will attack us. Satan's arrows, which could not defeat Christ, are

now aimed at us. The temptations are of the same type, tailored uniquely for each one of us, meant to exploit our weaknesses. Some temptations arise from the bad things of life. You—You are God’s child? Then how can you account for THIS—whatever bad thing THIS is in your life. Tragedy from death, from sickness, from poverty; how could your God let THIS happen to His child. If THIS happens to you, how can you be God’s child? Does God even care about you? Can He help you at all? How easily we fall for these temptations; convincing ourselves that God must be against us; despairing of His help and aid.

Or maybe it is the splendors of the world that Satan dangles in front of you. Wouldn’t life be great if you had . . . And here’s the easy way to get it! Won’t cost much; grab a few dollars that aren’t yours, ruin a few reputations to bring down those who might be promoted ahead of you, lie or cheat or deceive. All to win some little trinket in this world. How easily we fall for these temptations; our desire to have things and glory and people for ourselves leads us to forsake our God and listen to the voice of another.

Or again, the temptations come to twist; or simply to ignore God’s Word. Let’s not take that Word TOO seriously; surely God would want me to do THIS . . . whatever it is we have our heart set upon. It is far too easy to rationalize away any part of Scripture we don’t like. Or, simply to stop listening to it altogether. Then we can claim to be a Christian while ignoring whatever Christ says that we don’t like. And how great is that! We can have our cake and eat it too. How easily we fall for these temptations as well.

Be on your guard against such temptations. They are meant to do you harm, to destroy and kill you; to drive you away from your God and the life He gives. Such temptations will not give what they promise. No matter how great the promise they hold, they pale in comparison to the eternal life that is yours in Christ; do not exchange this life for a few gaudy trinkets.

When temptations come, fight back as Christ did: with the Word of God. Here is a shield and fortress; here is a sword to defeat Satan and his attacks. Here is certainty and power. Use that Word! When the bad things come, think of God's promises of deliverance and strength; His promise not to end all bad immediately, but to bear you up when you struggle, to deliver you in the end to His eternal rest and peace. Think of His promise made to YOU in baptism; when He named YOU His child and promised to deliver you to eternal life—safely guided through every evil attack in this world.

When the splendors of this world entice, think of God's greater gifts; set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. When false teachings arise, think of the truth of Jesus and His salvation, remember that God's ways are higher and better than our ways; that they bring greater blessings than any life we design for ourselves. Dwell on this powerful Word of God to stand firm against Satan and sin.

Arm yourself NOW for the fight; use Lent to study and read God's Word. This will prepare you for every assault of Satan. This will make you ready for whatever sin and Satan throw into your path. Don't know where to begin? Try the Gospel of Luke this Lent. Read a chapter a day. Read it to see your Champion, Jesus, fighting Satan for you—and winning the battle. Read Luke to see Jesus born into this world to do battle with Satan; see Him enter the wilderness and defeat Satan's temptations. See Him drive back Satan and His kingdom by healing the sick, raising the dead; undoing the damage caused by sin. See Him take the battle to Jerusalem and end it on the cross and empty tomb. See Him ascend into heaven, leaving behind His Word to bring His victory to you. This Lent, gaze upon Jesus as your champion, whose victory brings you freedom and life. Amen.