God's Kryptonite

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’” And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and 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.” And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’”

And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “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.’” And Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time. (ESV)

In the weeks before the death of Jesus, Jesus had encounters with the forces of sin, death and devil himself. He had to deal with the temptation to sin throughout his life. One of them took place in the desert wilderness.

The Bible says that the Spirit of God led Jesus unto the wilderness to be tempted. While God tempts no one to sin, he does permit his sons and daughters to be tempted by the world around them. When we think of Jesus in the wilderness, we think of him as being super-human, the strongest Superman ever. He had all the power of God available to him, yet he doesn’t use it. Jesus faced the devil with the same equipment Adam and Eve had, and with the same equipment you and I have – a free will and a God ready to help and support. What we have recorded here is not war games or the testing of a straw man, easy to knock down and set up again. The outcomes for Jesus are no more certain than the battles which take place in our lives every day.

In the process of what takes place, Jesus affirms the will of his father at the same time the devil is doing his utter best to get him to fall and forsake his father’s will and plan. Jesus does it, filled with the Spirit – the same Holy Spirit poured out upon us in our Baptisms. We received the adoption of sons and daughters in God’s convincing announcement. We don’t have to look someplace external for the Spirit of God – that Spirit is within us. We don’t have to wait for him to arrive or start working. That Spirit is alive and well and living in your heart, and in most cases, it is obvious to others that the Spirit of God is working within you.

We sometimes expect Satan to come to us as he does on the stage or in a cartoon – dressed in red tights, armed with a pitch fork, with a contract in hand, asking us to sell our soul. He didn’t come to Jesus like that. His first temptation is so subtle – it’s all in the one little word – IF. If you are the son of God... What kind of question is that? He knew Jesus was the Son of God. Jesus could have replied, “I’ll show you, you sleazy slime – I’ll show you that everything is under my Lordship and direction.” Jesus could remove all doubt by turning a few worthless stones into nutritious bread. He would save himself from hunger, but as a result, the word would get around that Jesus does miracles on demand, that he lets Satan set the agenda, and that satisfying your own needs is at the top of his agenda.

The response of Jesus is swift and certain – not deep contemplation or a long argument based on philosophy or reason. He uses his divine kryptonite: the Word of God, clear and powerful. Man shall not live by bread alone. There was an urge to unleash his power as God, and there was an urge to meet his nutritional needs, but the Word of God was effective and powerful in avoiding the fall into sin.

Satan questioned the very identity of Jesus, and again he creates doubt with the uncertainty of the word IF. If your loving Father is so good, why does
he permit you to remain lowly and in servitude. If you are God’s child, why is God so generous with the things that are under the control of godless people?

The second temptation is a kissing cousin to the first. With your super vision, take a look. It can all be yours. You don’t have to pick between view one, view two, or view three. You can have it all. It’s the power of owning, the power of being in control. It’s the kind of temptation or offer we find hard to refuse, and don’t think it was easier for Jesus.

Satan knows what causes the sparkle in our eyes. He knows the point where we stop possessing things, and they start possessing us. All Jesus needed to do was worship Satan – sing his praises, bow the head.

This temptation, like the first, is overcome with God’s kryptonite – by the power of the Word of God. And Jesus answered him, “It is written,

“‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’” (Luke 4:8 ESV)

The last one is for the glory seeker or the show-off. IF you are the Son of God, don’t keep it to yourself. Let other people see what you’ve got. Imagine the thunderous applause. Very likely no one would ever find out if you fell for either of the first two temptations, but no one will miss this one.

The powerful kryptonite of the Word of God is final and defeating: You shall not put the Lord your God to the test. Jesus knew the power of NO. Jesus knew the power of the Word of God. Saying NO to the first two temptations strengthened Jesus to stand up to the last one, and he was armed with the Word. Don’t we find this true? It’s hard to break a habit of sinning. We find it comfortable, and convince ourselves that our little sins can’t be so bad, or we would be paying more serious consequences. If, by the power of God and His Word, we can break the cycle, we can experience God’s strength and partnership. When we depend on God and use the kryptonite of his word, we can obey his commands and grow in grace and doing good.