

Genesis 3:1-21 (Matthew 4:1-11)

The first time that laughter was ever heard in our world would surely have been after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Satan would have been laughing to himself as he slithered away. He was delighted. Success with his very first attempt. The man and woman were like putty in his hands. He had ruined God's perfect creation. He had brought sin and death into the world. Surely Satan could now picture what lay ahead in the future for mankind...fighting, adultery, murder, stealing, covetousness, divorce, anger, jealousy. He could envision families torn apart and hating each other, nations waging war against each other. For Satan, the eating of the fruit in the Garden was just the beginning. Now nothing could stop him. Every child born of Eve would be his. And after they lived their life in sin, and then died, they would belong to him forever in hell. Yes, Satan was surely laughing with an evil grin, proud of what he had just done. But how true it is that he who laughs last, laughs best. God had an answer for Satan's destruction.

Christians sometimes wonder why God allowed Eve to be tempted in the first place. Why did He put that forbidden tree there in the Garden to begin with? It is not for us to question the mind of God. But we must realize that mankind would never really have known the love of God in its deepest measure, unless that love found him in his wretched state and rescued him from death and eternal damnation. God's answer was not to start over and eliminate the devil and the tree in the Garden of Eden. His answer, rather, was to send His Son so that in Jesus, and in Him alone, you and I would have the antidote to Satan's poison.

If you ever happen to be scuba diving down off the coast of Florida, and you spot a moray eel, you had better stay away. If the eel clamps its jaws on your arm or leg, it's on there for good. It will never let go. The only way to remove a moray eel is to cut off its head. And so in the Garden, Satan clamped down with his jaws upon Adam and Eve and all their children, and he will never let go. The poison from his mouth is deadly, and it would kill us in hell after making our lives miserable here on earth. But God's answer was to cut off Satan's head. "*I will put enmity,*" He told the Serpent, "*between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*" And so the battle had begun. But the outcome was never in question. God would laugh last. His words could not fail. Jesus, the Seed of the woman, would come and cut off Satan's head.

A man was sitting on a barstool watching a television show on the TV overhead. It was a gripping crime drama, and at the end of the show the victim was rescued and the bad guys were caught. Another patron noticed how relieved the man was at the show's happy ending, and commented that he had seen that same episode before, and so he knew how it would turn out. "Oh, I have too," said the man, "a dozen times at least, and so I didn't think the cops could pull it off one more time."

As silly as this man is, consider the fact that we operate in the same exact way. We have the story of God's answer to Satan in front of us. We have heard the story many times. But when we're tempted and troubled, we doubt the outcome and imagine that all is lost. When we are tempted, and when we fall, we can hear Satan laughing, but we struggle to see the hand of God.

There is a reason why God allows us to be tempted just as Eve was tempted in the Garden. "*He who has not been tempted,*" says Martin Luther, "*knows nothing.*" "*As long as we are not tempted, we have a strong faith,*" he says, "*but if any temptation comes our way, we soon become aware of what kind of faith we have.*" Jesus had perfect faith. And so when He was confronted by Satan in the desert, even though Jesus was physically weak and exhausted, He did not fall. He crushed Satan beneath His

feet. He did this with the power of the Word. He did not argue with the devil. He did not appeal to reason and common sense. Jesus met each temptation with the Word of God.

Are you and I better, stronger, and wiser than Jesus? Then how do we think we will overcome temptations if we barely have a grasp of God's Word? "*Once we lose sight of the Word,*" says Luther, "*the ways and means of help are no more.*" But if you have God's Word, you use it, you gladly hear and learn it, then God will not permit you to be tempted beyond what you can endure.

God both loves, and He hates temptations. He loves them when they turn us to prayer and His Word for strength. He hates them when they cause us to despair. Jesus knows something about temptations. He was tempted in the flesh just as we are. And so He is able to pray for us, knowing the weakness of our flesh. Temptations come from Satan, but God allows them, because without them we would become proud, we would never pray, and we would never turn to the Word of God.

In the Garden of Eden Satan was triumphant. But in a desert many centuries later Satan failed. And his failure is your victory. Jesus did not just crush Satan; He crushed him for you. In the desert He crushed Satan's head, and on the cross He cut his head off. Satan's temptations, therefore, cannot destroy you, not when the Word of God is in your ears and before your eyes. The venom from his fangs cannot kill you in hell, not with Jesus as your antidote.

That antidote is here on the altar for you today. If you have not sinned this past week; if you have not been tempted by Satan, nor fallen into temptation, then you have no need of the antidote to Satan's poison. But if you are weak like me; if you are a sinner like me; if you face temptation daily, and daily you fall because of the weakness of your flesh, then here is Christ for you. In bread and wine He comes to combat Satan's poison within you. The same Jesus who defeated Satan in the desert, who crushed Satan beneath His feet on the cross by His bloody death for sinners, for you, and who rose in triumph to give God the last laugh over the devil--this Jesus is here in the Sacrament for the forgiveness of your sins, for the strengthening of your faith, for your comfort, your joy, your salvation. What Christian would not want and desire to have Christ in this way, at every opportunity, every week, every Sunday, even every day if that was possible?

And so today you are strengthened through Word and Sacrament. But out there is a world filled with temptation. When you fall, do not despair. You have a merciful God. He forgives you for Jesus' sake. Do not be ashamed to come here to His House because you daily fall into temptation. Resist temptation. Flee from it. But do not let your weakness of flesh be an excuse to stay away from God's mercy. God's arms are always open to you, my friend. Look at His hands. They were pierced for you. Satan may be laughing now whenever you fall into sin. But God will have the last laugh, for nothing can separate you from His love--not the weakness of your flesh, not the sins of your past, not the devil and his temptations. You, my friend, have a Savior in Jesus Christ. Amen.