

“The Cosmic Chess Game”

Matthew 4:1-11

Series: Summer Getaways: Week 4 - Jesus and a Mountain of Deception

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July 17, 2022

Hungry. So hungry. Not just famished or even ravenous. He is literally starving. Not just four hours or four days but forty days without food. Weak and weary, the Spirit drives Him, pushes Him, pulls Him deeper into the desert. Hot winds scour the arid hills. The same endless wasteland rolls away in every direction. Like a creature under a magnifying glass the unforgiving sun scorches Him. Where is the Spirit taking Him? To meet the Accuser.

Out of the shadows he steps. It is impossible to describe him for he is a chameleon – assuming whatever shape the situation demands. This is not their first meeting. No, they know each other quite well. They’ve watched and analyzed each other’s moves like two master chess players. It is a long game – longer than time itself. And the board? It’s broader than earth, than the entire universe. This is a game of life and death. In the end, both will die. But only One will live.

He remembers the first move. It wasn’t in a forsaken, baked, bone-dry desert. The enemy’s first strike was in a garden – a lush, lovely, cool paradise. The Accuser donned the disguise of a slithering serpent. His mission: take possession of the planet, gain a foothold in the creation from which he can launch a large-scale rebellion against the King. His strategy was brilliant. He didn’t descend with legions of demons and overwhelm the earth. He struck at the top. He worked on the caretakers of the planet, the ones the King put in charge of the place. He convinced them to hand over the earth to him. He planned to conquer the world without spilling a drop of blood.

His method is simple yet so subtle. Satan uses a quality buried deep in the humans: pride. God gave pride to the humans so they could feel joy. The King wants them to rejoice in their achievements, to be proud of their children, to take pride in their community. God designed pride to fill them with joy so they could not help giving that joy back to the Lord. When they see all the blessings and accomplishments in their lives, pride would move them to give all the glory and thanks to God.

But Satan saw an opportunity. If he can take pride and twist it, he can turn the humans away from God, even against God. So he simply places something between the humans and God: a mirror. Always keep their eyes on themselves – that is his scheme. Make them take credit for their beauty, their wealth, their wisdom, their achievements. Encourage them to compare themselves to each other. Puff them up with pride, inflate their egos, convince them they are superior, that their children are better than the rest, that their nation is the greatest on earth. Keep them always focused on “I”, “me” and “mine.” And above all, never let them give gratitude or glory to God. Never let them thank Him for who they are or what they have. Then they will believe they don’t need God. And, if he plays it right, they will believe they are gods. The humans fall for it. We’ve been falling for it ever since.

And so the deadly conflict begins. Since that first capture, countless moves and counter moves are made across the playing field of this planet. But now, God makes a new bold advance. He walks onto the playing field not with squadrons of winged warriors, not

with blinding glory. God invades enemy territory alone. And most surprising of all, He enters the arena as a human. At first, Satan is baffled. He expects a full frontal assault, a cosmic clash of power – not a frail and defenseless human. And why did His Father weaken Him with forty days of fasting? It seems like something he would do: starve the poor Boy almost to death and then send Him into battle, alone. It's too easy. This has to be a trick, a trap. 'What's my next move?'

Then a thought strikes like thunder: He's a human, a real human with human hungers, desires and drives. All His power and glory are handicapped by His human nature. That's the answer: use the old strategy that's worked for eons. Turn His pride against Him. Start with the most basic desire of all: **Physical Appetite**. The devil attacks the obvious: hunger. "If you are the Son of God," Satan said, "tell these stones to become bread" (Matthew 4:3). Fill their stomachs and they will follow you anywhere. That is always Satan's first move. 'Eat the fruit of the tree Eve and Adam,' he says, 'it's good for food.' God put the appetites in them – a desire for the necessities of life: food, shelter, health and love. The devil simply exaggerates these natural hungers. Don't just eat to live, live to eat. A house is not enough, you need a mansion. Make exercise an obsession. Sex in marriage is too old fashion and boring – you need to be adventurous and open minded. Worship pleasure, obey your desires, follow your feelings wherever they take you. Satan turns these God-given appetites into gods. 'You are the Son of God. You have the power to turn these stones into bread. Obey your hunger. Do it because you can.'

"It is written," Jesus replied, "'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4, Deuteronomy 8:3). Just because I have a hunger, just because I can satisfy it, does not mean I must worship it. Desires are not divine. The devil will turn every appetite into an addiction and every pleasure into a prison. Jesus' solution is simple: make your physical appetites obey God's Word and Spirit. Eat, drink, make love and play God's way. After all, God gave them to us. He knows how they work best.

Time for round two. A windstorm swirls around the contenders and blots out the sun. When the dust settles, Jesus looks down from a ledge to a swirling mass of humanity. He knows this place: it is the holy Temple in Jerusalem. The worshiping crowds look heavenward and see a man balancing on a corner just wide enough for his foot. "If you are the Son of God" Satan whispers from his nearby perch. "Throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone'" (Matthew 4:6, Psalm 91:11, 12). **Popular Approval** – Satan's second attack. This is the ultimate publicity stunt. 'You are their Messiah. You want them to follow You. This is the perfect stage for Your grand entrance. They expect You to appear in the Temple (see Malachi 3:1). If You do a double back flip and God catches You before You hit the pavement, even the chief priests can't deny You are the One.' Then, with a smile Satan added, 'And then you will know if Your Father loves you.'

The devil used the same attack in Eden. 'Eat the fruit and your eyes will be opened. You will be wise and impressive.' Satan knows how much we want to be liked, how we live for the approval of our peers. It starts in the family circle, it grows on the playground, the playing field and in the classroom. Our need to be liked reaches full strength when we search

for a mate, a job or a promotion. We desire acceptance and fear rejection. Satan hits Jesus with a double blow: He can win love from the crowd and the Lord with one leap.

Again Jesus replies with a short answer straight from Scripture: “It is also written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Matthew 4:7; Deuteronomy 6:16). ‘People pleasing’ is a deadly form of pride. It is also a prison. The only way to be free is to rest in the unconditional love of your Heavenly Father. Jesus is secure in His Father’s love. That’s why He can give love to God and people instead of grab it.

Final round. The scene below changes again. The Temple ledge becomes a mountain cliff. The crowds in the plaza now include the kingdoms of the entire planet. “All this I will give you,” Satan says, “if you will bow down and worship me” (Matthew 4:9). **Power Appropriation** – the devil’s last weapon. ‘You’ve come to claim the world? You want it back? Here it is. You can have it. What a hassle these humans are. Besides, I’m tired of all this fighting. Let’s end this foolish cosmic chess game right now. There’s no need for suffering, torture, or bloodshed. I’m a reasonable man. Here, let me show you a little shortcut. You can appropriate all this power, You can rule all the kingdoms of the world for the very low, low cost of saying a simple prayer to me. Five minutes on Your knees and the world is Yours.’

Everything was on the table now. The prize lay at Jesus’ feet. The goal of His mission is before His very eyes and within reach of His grasp. The devil said the same to Adam and Eve, “For God knows that when you eat (the fruit) ... you will be like God” (Genesis 3:5). We all grab for power – the power to control circumstances, people and even God. Most of the stress, anger and fear in this life come from the fact that we don’t have the power to make our kingdom come and our will be done on earth. Yet we still grab for power, hunt for shortcuts and make deals with the devil.

In that instant, Jesus can gain the whole world ... but He will also lose His soul to Satan. His mission will be lost and so will we. This shortcut is a dead end. His reply is swift and decisive: “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’” (Matthew 4:10; Deuteronomy 6:13). With that, Jesus shatters the mirror of pride Satan tries to put between Him and His Father.

This battle is over. Jesus walks away from the pleasure of a full stomach, the popularity of the multitudes, the power of reigning over the kingdoms of the world. The devil “left him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). The decisive conflict is still to come. They will meet again on a dark hilltop, outside the holy city, before the eyes of the nations, perched high on a cross. Satan conquered the world without a drop of blood. Jesus will win it back with all His blood. That will be the turning point of the war. But the two continue to fight over the battleground of your life. With every day, with every desire, with every decision, with every deed, you have the choice to worship pleasure, popularity, power or the Prince of Peace.

Will you stare in the mirror of pride or shatter it?