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Jesus Is... Strong!

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TEXT: Mark 1:12-13 (ESV)

The Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And He was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to Him.

Dear friends,

“Yes, Jesus loves me.” By the way, He loves you, too. I've always loved that little song, it contains such wonderful, simple truths about Jesus. And there's one particular truth in that hymn that's a comfort to me, it says, “They are weak, but He is strong.” We see that truth being demonstrated today in this passage we read earlier. In case you didn't pick up on it, there's a serious battle going on in this story. Let's look at the text again. After His baptism, we find Jesus heading out into the wilderness. And the wilderness, in that part of the world, is dry, hot, and dangerous. It lacks food and water. You never know what wild creatures you might run into out there. This was no Sunday school picnic for Jesus. Why is He there? We're told the spirit of God had led Him there. Jesus is obediently following God's lead. It is kind of a strange turn of events, though, when you think about it. After all, remember that Jesus has just been baptized and has heard those endearing words from His Heavenly Father: “You're my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.” He's been covered and empowered by God, the Spirit. And yet immediately Jesus finds himself out in this desolate location. You might be wondering, “Why does the Spirit have Him out there, of all places?” It appears that Jesus must walk a road that leads through rough, dangerous places like we do. He's experiencing the fullness of being human.

And get this: that state wasn't for a day or two; Mark tells us it was 40 days. That number reminds us of Moses and the people of Israel. Remember, God rescued His people from slavery in Egypt and then led them through the wilderness for 40 years to the land He promised them. We know from the story it wasn't an easy trip by any means – it was filled with dangers and trials and challenges and temptations. But God faithfully provided for them along the way, trying to teach them to trust and obey Him. And unfortunately, they were weak and slow learners and not trusting God and rebelling against Him again and again, which always led to trouble. If this were the first time you ever read a gospel like Mark, you might wonder, “Will Jesus be able to hold up in all that, in that dangerous place? Sure, He's the son of God, but He's also a true man.” By the way, we're also told of wild animals out there with Jesus, Mark talks about this again. He seems to be telling us that Jesus knows what it's like to experience physical danger. This world is a scary and dangerous place sometimes.

We're told as well that Jesus faced a different kind of danger out there: spiritual danger. For 40 days, he was being tempted by Satan. The conflict was on, He's under attack. The devil was out to throw a wrench into the mission of Jesus, to get Him to disobey His father's plans for Him; to knock Him off track and perhaps even to get Him to give up. I know some people question if there really is a devil. They wonder, “is this kind of thinking and talk a vestige from ancient times? Aren't we more sophisticated and smart than to buy into that now?” Well, I firmly believe that there is a personal devil who's out to destroy every one of us and keep us from God, and to not believe in his existence is dangerous to your welfare.

Why do I think he's for real? First of all, because Jesus did so, why wouldn't I? Jesus obviously experienced the reality or he wouldn't have shared this story with the disciples or taught them of how dangerous Satan is. Peter believed in him. You know, he knew from experience and warned other believers of the devil, describing him as a “devouring lion.” The apostle Paul did – he wrote of spiritual warfare and our need to wear “spiritual armor” to fend off the attacks of Satan. Martin Luther, the great reformer, did – he wrote about Satan frequently in his hymns and in his other writings. C.S. Lewis, that great thinker from the last century, did. He once wrote, in regard to the question of the reality of Satan, “Every square inch of this planet is claimed by Christ and counter claimed by Satan.” So out in that wilderness, there's a real war going on. Jesus was there to do battle with the evil one.

Interestingly, unlike the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark spends no time describing the specifics of the temptations that Jesus faced. He just says he was tempted by Satan. Perhaps Mark is intentionally letting our imaginations go to work as we think about our own temptations. We've all had them – temptations to not trust God, to call into question God's motives and character, His will and love and wisdom for our lives, temptations to give in to disobedience... it happens to every one of us in a host of ways. The bottom line is always: am I going to choose to do life God's way or not, am I going to trust and obey Him or not? And in this story of Jesus' temptation, we learn that Jesus knows exactly what we're going through as human beings because He went through those things to.

Finally, Mark tells us angels ministered to Jesus out there; they were not there to keep Jesus from being tested by Satan, just as they wouldn't keep Him from the cross itself. But these heavenly messengers ministered to Jesus, perhaps with words of assurance that His father loved Him, or they might have even provided food and drink for Him, like the angel did for the Prophet Elijah in that Old Testament story when Elijah was in the wilderness in 1 Kings 19. So as you can see, we're witnessing a very serious battle taking place here. It's a bit of a cliffhanger. How will Jesus do?

Our future depends on how He does out there, you know, in the wilderness, when you think about it. Matthew and Luke's gospels tell us Jesus didn't give in and He won the battle and Satan departed from Him, but Mark does not mention that. It's as if he wants us to see that this opening conflict with Satan was just the beginning. It would continue all the way through His ministry, right up to the cross and grave. He never departs. He'd continue his attacks, tempting Jesus to step away from God's plan. Through Peter's rebuke in Mark 8, he would be there in a garden, the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus will pray as he sees the cross looming ahead, "Father, take this cup suffering away from me, yet not my will, but thy will be done." Then He'll turn His face towards His crucifixion to fulfill God's plan to save us from sin and death and the power of the devil. His death on our behalf provides forgiveness for sin, and a restored relationship with God, and eternal life. Satan is beaten in this battle and ultimately, later on, at the cross and grave. As a teacher of mine once said, "At the cross, Jesus might have been crucified, but Satan got 'nailed'." This Jesus is really something, isn't He?

Now remember that we're doing a little series entitled "Jesus is ____", filling in the blank with the word each week that scripture teaches us about Him. Last week it was "Jesus is: 'God's son'". So today we complete our "Jesus is" statement with the word "strong." Jesus is strong. I mean, look at what He went through and accomplished. Look at His victory, and that is really good news for you and me, because Satan's still on the attack in our world today. Yeah, it's true, Jesus has won the war over sin and death and the devil. But we are still in the midst of mop up operations in this world of ours. He'll continue trying to ruin people's lives until the final day when he's destroyed once and for all. Satan still works to keep the unbeliever in Jesus confused, for instance – keep him faithless, filling people's heads with all kinds of misinformation that drives them away from Christ and keeps them under his thumb. And believers continue to face Satan's temptations thrown our way as well. We're still in the wilderness, you see, on our way to the promised land, Heaven, and we're in a war zone as we follow Jesus. The moment you were baptized in Jesus Christ, you entered the war zone.

So how does he carry out his attacks? He's very creative. He still tempts us in a whole variety of ways. Sometimes he tempts us during times of hardship and suffering and illness, chronic pain, a financial crisis, the sudden death of a loved one, or we observe unexplained tragedies going on around us in the world. It's then that he whispers in our ear: "Are you sure God can be trusted and that He loves you? How could you let this happen to you? It doesn't look like He loves you to me. I think you should give up on Him." Sometimes he subtly sneaks up on us with promises of pleasures we can enjoy if we just ignore God's instructions and do life his way. His way, Satan's way, "It's harmless," he'll say, "no one will know. You deserve a little pleasure and excitement in your life." Or he'll breed dissatisfaction in us by causing us to compare our lives with others who have more, filling us with a sense of being shorted by God. Making us jealous and covetous, thus driving us to focus our lives on attaining more, more possessions, more success and recognition, and suddenly they've become idols that we unconsciously serve and worship instead of God, and then we're in dangerous territory. And he attempts to distract us and render us useless for serving Christ in the world, he gets us busy chasing after other priorities, worldly priorities. He calls into question the instruction of Jesus, seek first the kingdom of God. He says, "That can't be right. What about your well-being? First, take care of yourself. Then you'll have time to serve God's kingdom." So we're always and always will be under attack until our final breath. And we know from experience the sad truth, but it's all too easy for us to fall prey to his lies and deceptions and to give in.

Now, why is that? Because we are weak, we are not his equal. Martin Luther teaches us in that opening hymn today, *A Mighty Fortress*,

For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

So what are we who are weak to do? We turn to Jesus, we run to Him who is strong. He will help us and strengthen us in our battle. As we see Jesus out in that wilderness, being tempted by Satan today, I'm reminded of a passage from the New Testament book of Hebrews, which describes Jesus as our great high priest. It says,

We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the son of God. Let us hold fast our confession, for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who, in every respect, has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. So let us then, with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

We have a great high priest, Jesus, and He's defeated the power of sin and the devil and death. He's exalted by God. He stands with us as protector and preserver. Yes, we are weak, but we can turn to Him, confidently knowing that Jesus sympathizes with us and Jesus is strong, stronger than anything. And in Him we are made strong.

And one of the best ways to turn to Him for His strength is the privilege of prayer. In our prayers we seek His mercy and guidance and strength and all-sufficient grace and find help for our weakness. As an old gospel hymn, *What a Friend* testifies, "Jesus knows our every weakness. Take it to the Lord in prayer." So I ask you, how is your prayer life these days? Are you staying connected to Him who loves you, the strong One? Are you in touch with Him daily, seeking His will on a daily basis? Is prayer an automatic reflex in your life or the last thing you try when all else fails? Prayer is so easy for us to put aside and forget, yet it's the most powerful tool we can have against temptation. Satan hates it when we pray.

Now, if you're thinking about getting started in developing a strong prayer life, I encourage you to start today. Get started. I use a little acronym you might find helpful for my daily prayers, it's called ACTS. I begin with an A, which is adoration; a time of praising God for who He is, for His mercy and His might. Then I move to C, which is my confession time. "Lord, I'm sorry for not loving you with all my heart, soul,

strength, and mind, and my neighbor as myself.” And then I moved to T, which is thanksgiving; thanking Him for the cross and forgiveness and His promises and all these provided me. And then I finally get to the S, which is for supplication, which simply means asking Him. I ask for His kingdom to come and His will to be done in this world and in my life. And I bring loved ones in need for His help and healing. I ask for strength to obey and walk in His ways and witness for Him more boldly. I seek His guidance. I commend my little ACTS acronym to you, it's helped me so much along the way. Sometimes when I'm overwhelmed by life, though, I still find myself saying just this: “Help me, Jesus.” And He does. I'm no expert on prayer by any means, but I tell you this: I don't know where I would be these days without it and without Him. Through it, I am strengthened to fight the good fight. The Lord is faithful.

So back to our theme, “Jesus Is.” This story makes it so very clear, Jesus is strong. We are weak and we're under attack every day. There is one who is out to destroy our faith, to do us in. But Jesus is so strong. He defeated the power of sin and the power of death and the power of the devil. He's the victorious one. So I encourage you: don't be tempted to go it alone in life. Trust Him, turn to Him daily in prayer, stick closely to Him every moment as if your life depends on it. Because you know what? It does.

Amen.