

When we think of tempting or testing in our lives, we typically think it as coming from the devil. After all, he is adversary, the accuser.

Yet what do we hear in our Gospel reading this morning? Jesus asks Philip, one of the Twelve, where they'll buy bread for the multitude, and "He said this to test him." Jesus is here the one who tests! That might be quite the shock to us.

Yet while both Satan and Jesus are recorded as testing people in the Bible, as we look closer, we see that there are considerable differences between the two. To get an idea of these differences, we'll look at how Satan tempted or tested Jesus in the wilderness and how Jesus tests Philip here at the feeding of the five thousand, as well as other Scriptural examples.

As we better understand the differences – and the similarities – we'll be better able to resist the temptations of the devil and better able to trust God and even praise Him in the midst of the tests He sends us.

So for a first point of comparison, let's consider the situation the person is in and what he is tempted to do. In each situation, there is a need, specifically here a need concerning hunger and bread.

Jesus has been fasting in the wilderness for forty days and is starving. Philip is looking at a great crowd who have spent the day listening to Jesus and are now quite hungry.

In both places, testing arises in times of need. And this makes sense, if you think about it. A test that comes when everything is going well is not near as difficult as one that comes when you've got needs or problems.

The difference in this point comes with what the person being tested is asked to do. In the case of how Satan tests, he usually asks for just a little thing, something small.

He tempts Jesus to just make a few little loaves of bread. For you or me, that would be a big thing, but for the Son of God who brought the universe into existence from nothing, this would be like asking someone to pour a glass of water from the faucet or get a box of cereal from the pantry. It's little, easily within Jesus' abilities. And how small it appears is part of the temptation: surely a loving Father wouldn't begrudge His beloved Son some simple bread?

That's usually how Satan goes after us Christians as well. He doesn't throw a big temptation our way, just little things, things that are easily done, things that shouldn't really matter, things that surely God wouldn't care about if we did them just this once.

We're tested in this way because Satan knows that our sinful flesh has a much easier time making excuses for little sins than for big ones, and he's happy to take us away from our Lord even if it's only a little bit at a time.

On the other hand, when our Lord tests us, it is often in ways that, for us, seem very large, maybe even impossible.

In our Gospel text, Christ asks Philip where they'll buy bread for the crowd. Such a thing is impossible! As Philip points out, even if they had what would be thousands of dollars today, even that wouldn't be enough for everyone to get even a little. And, they're in the middle of nowhere. It's not like there's a supermarket nearby that would have that much bread in stock. Jesus here is asking Philip a seemingly-impossible question.

And this isn't the only place this sort of thing happens in the Bible. When crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land for the first time, the priests are supposed to go stand in the river – which is overflowing its banks – and the water will then stop flowing. Gideon is supposed to defeat the great Midianite army with three hundred men whose only seeming qualification is how they drink water. Martha is told that, if she believes, she will see the glory of God, even as she can smell her brother's dead body rotting in the tomb. God calls His people to trust in Him in impossible situations, so that they might know that “with God, all things are possible.”

God will test you, perhaps in ways that seem impossible. This might be in calling you to be a voice in your community that you don't think anyone will want to hear, or leave a job that's requiring you to sin, or risking alienation from friends and family for speaking the truth.

God says He is the One who provides your daily bread, and He will put you in situations where doing what is right is going to seem to make getting that impossible, so that you might know that “with God, all things are possible.”

In addition to facing need and how to respond, the tests that come your way have a second thing in common. Regardless of whether they come from Satan or from God, they will revolve around God's Word and whether or not you will trust in it.

Obviously, though, the approaches are very different. Satan wants you to act contrary to God's Word, go against what the Holy Spirit has spoken through His prophets, apostles, and evangelists. His most-commonly employed trap is asking, “Did God really say?” In the wilderness, he tells Jesus “If you are the Son of God,” which is what the Father had just said at Jesus' Baptism.

And as with the previous point of comparison, Satan will often do this in small, seemingly-indifferent ways. He'll take what is clear and try to muddy it just a little bit.

He'll ask if the whole Bible is really God's Word – all of it – or if perhaps there's some of man's ideas that have slipped in over the centuries.

He'll pull verses out of context and then twist them to make God seem evil and then get you to ignore those verses because of course God would never say or do anything that seems wrong to you.

He'll say that God would never deceive you or mislead you (which is right!), and so if there are parts of the Bible that don't make sense to you or seem contradictory they're probably an error that got worked in there somehow.

Satan knows the Word is the Sword of the Spirit that can leave him with horrible wounds, and so he does everything he can to try to dull the blade or make it seem too heavy to swing.

In contrast, Jesus shows us in His own example how to wield the Word, as that is the weapon He uses to defeat Satan in the wilderness. Jesus is always striving to increase your trust in Him and His

Word. He speaks to His disciples, tells them to give Him the bread and fish, the little food they do have, and when they do this, He provides more bread than hundreds of denarii could have purchased.

And again, His call for His people to trust His Word is nothing new. He tells the ancient Israelites that they'll conquer the mighty city of Jericho by walking in circles and then yelling at it – and that's what happens! He sends out the twelve and tells them not to take spare clothes or food but to trust in Him, and not only do they not starve, they come back excitedly telling Jesus how even the demons were subject to them in His name. He tells Peter to get out of a boat and walk to Him on the water, and until Peter sees the waves and doubts the Word, he walks on water.

When He puts you in testing situations, He desires that you trust in Him so that when His Word proves true – and it always does – you'll trust in Him all the more.

He gives you His Word so that you can drive back the devil and his lies. Don't rely on your own feelings or reason to do this; it won't work! Rather, trust the weapon that the Lord has placed in your hands, and learn to use it well!

The Lord has promised to give you your daily bread – trust Him. The Lord tells you that you cannot live by bread alone but rather by every word that comes from His mouth – learn and treasure those words, for unlike bread which is here today and gone tomorrow, the Word of the Lord endures forever.

The Lord has given you His Word that even in the midst of persecution and suffering and all other troubles that might come, He is still with you. Look to the examples of history, of Scripture, of your own life, and give thanks for all the times that God has kept His promises and preserved you.

A third point of comparison between the tests of the devil and the tests of God lie in their purposes. Both send testing for a purpose, a reason. Trials and tribulations that come are never random, never meaningless. While we're in them, and even afterward, we might not understand why they're there. But there is a reason.

Satan's reason is always to bring about our downfall, to separate us from Christ. This is why he tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden, to separate them from their loving Creator. This is why he tempted Christ in the wilderness, to try to ruin God's plan to restore mankind to Himself.

Satan is always trying to get us to trust in ourselves rather than God. He is seeking to make us look at our Lord and His Word with suspicion and doubt rather than trust and confidence. He wants to fool us into thinking that there are times when we'd be better off deciding things for ourselves, doing what we "know" is best rather than accepting that God's ways are not our ways but are in fact much better.

Satan doesn't have the power to force anyone out of God's Kingdom. He can't enter the wedding feast and drag the guests out; he can only sit out in the darkness and try to lure people to leave of their own accord. And once one listens to the lies and wanders back out into the dark, Satan is there, ready to pounce.

Against this, Christ works to strengthen us against the old evil foe, and He often uses trials to do it. It is hard while we're in the midst of them. That's why we have to trust His Word, and know that He does all things for our good.

Scripture tells us that He prunes us, like a master vinedresser pruning grape vines. Having parts of your lives cut away may hurt, but the Lord does it because He knows that those parts aren't good for you.

Scripture tells us that God refines us as precious metal in a fire. His discipline may burn, but He is doing it to burn away your sinful impurities so that you may shine all the brighter with His light.

And the Lord doesn't only give illustrations; His Word contains examples of this very thing. When the people of Israel stray after idols and begin to reject the Lord, He has to send oppression and hardship to them to bring them back.

The disciples are shown their own weakness, tried many times, so that they would not rely on their own strength but instead put their trust fully in the Lord when He sends them out to all nations.

The Church in Acts suffers many instances of persecution, and yet each one causes it to spread and grow.

Christ uses testing to strengthen our faith, like how exercise strengthens our bodies.

When He disciplines you, He is driving you away from the things that would lead to your eternal destruction and back toward His love.

When He puts you in times of need and uncertainty, He is causing you to cling to Him all the more.

When He brings you through hard times, He is giving you moments that then you can look back on later and see His faithfulness clearly displayed, and then have more confidence and trust in Him for the future. As the well-known hymn puts it, He is "God, our help in ages past" and so then also "our hope for years to come."

These times of His care in the midst of trials also become ways in which you can witness to others. God is your anchor and hope that you can share with others caught in the storm.

There is one last point I would make about trials. And that is who is in control. Satan may think that he is in control, that he can snatch you away while the Lord isn't looking, that he can confound you in ways that only he saw coming. And he'd like you to think this as well.

But Satan is totally wrong in this. Nothing is outside of the Lord's control. Our God guides all things for good, even times of trial and testing. Satan may rage fiercely, but the Lord has him crushed under his heel, bound in unbreakable chains.

The devil can only do what God allows him, and not the slightest bit more. When you are being tested, be it something small or something large, the Lord is in control. Though it might not seem it at first, the fact that the Lord God is over all our testing is a great comfort. Our God is love, and so all that He sends us, even trials, are out of love.

While He spoke to Philip, He already knew what He was going to do. Because testing comes ultimately from His hand, you can know for sure that He will not send more than you can bear. As He tells us in His Word, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with

the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” He controls the temptation, the testing, He gives the strength to endure it, and then He also provides the way out when the trial has accomplished the purpose for which He sent it.

When Satan would test us and want us to think that we must listen to him to escape, we can defy him and his lies and trust ourselves to the Lord who rules and reigns over all things.

When you are in times of temptation and testing, follow in the footsteps of your Lord.

Pray to your Father who art in Heaven. Pray to Him to give you this day your daily bread, for He has promised to provide for you, and by praying this you’ll remind yourself who it is that gives every good and perfect gift to you.

Pray that He would lead you not into temptation, for He will only bring you to those tests that He knows will strengthen you and draw you closer to Him.

Pray that He would deliver you from evil, and know that He has already crushed the evil one under His cross and won salvation for you.

As He cares for the sparrows of the air and the flowers of the field and the thousands who came to hear Him, He most certainly cares for you.

In His holy name, amen.