

# A Longer Look at the Lessons

February 21 to  
March 28, 2021

Series B, The Season of Lent

## The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:9-13

The First Sunday in Lent

February 21, 2021

In the Three-Year Lectionary, all three series assign the Temptation of Jesus to be the Holy Gospel for the First Sunday in Lent. This is fitting, for the season focuses on our Lord's ministry as Representative Man, and His temptation surely was part of that. Lent is traditionally a time for fasting and introspection. But the Sundays are called Sundays *in* Lent. They are breaks in the "40-day Lenten fast," for Sundays are "little Easters," a time for celebrating, not fasting. The Holy Gospels for Sundays in Lent, however, do point to the time of Jesus' suffering and its significance for our redemption.

When Jesus came to John to be baptized, it was not as an act of repentance for His own sins, but it was the right way for Him to begin ministry. Thus He put Himself in the place of all sinners, "to fulfill all righteousness," as Matthew's Gospel puts it (3:15). His saving work ultimately would involve Him in the same stance when He would carry our sins in His body and give Himself in suffering and death as God's atoning sacrifice on the cross.

1. Why was the Spirit given to Jesus at His Baptism? (See Isaiah 61:1.) Why did the Spirit descend in visible form like a dove? (See John 1:32–34.) What significance is there in the fact that the Father spoke His affirming words at this time?
  
2. How does this event underscore the Christian doctrine of God's revelation of Himself as the Holy Trinity?

"[When] Jesus came up out of the water" cannot be used to argue exclusively for baptizing by immersion. Jewish tradition included many "baptisms," religious applications of water. The probability is that John stood in a shallow eddy and baptized by scooping up water and pouring it on those who came down into the water to him. "Came up out of the water" simply means Jesus returned to the river's bank.

Jesus' testing in the desert followed immediately after the exalting experience of His Baptism, when the voice from heaven identified Him as the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit came to fill Him with power for His ministry. "Immediately" the Spirit sent Him out to be tested. This sequence of events has been the experience of many.

3. Why is a time of spiritual uplifting so often followed by a time of testing? Why was it important that the man, Jesus, face Satan's testing immediately and alone as He began His public ministry?

Mark's account is very brief. He does not describe the temptations. That the Greek for "being tempted" is in the present tense indicates a time of continued testing rather than some isolated incidents. The other evangelists tell of three tests, possibly as a summary of what Jesus was experiencing: being tempted with physical satisfaction, with personal success, and with political power. The most pointed aspect of the testing was that it was a temptation to take another way, an easier way, to achieve His purposes through self-serving instead of going God's difficult way of sacrifice.

While "forty days" is the Hebrew way of indicating a period of time long enough to accomplish what was intended, there is nothing in the context of this passage to suggest anything other than 40 chronological days. Jesus was tempted by Satan, "the adversary." His name implies "one who lies in ambush."

4. Who is Satan, and why was he immediately lying in ambush to trip Jesus and lead Him away from His Father's will? (See Jude 6.) What feeling is conveyed to you by Mark's "He was with the wild animals"? What comes across with Mark's "angels were ministering to Him"?
5. What does it mean for us in our lives as Christians that Jesus overcame all temptations and passed all tests? (See Hebrews 4:14–16.)

John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod Antipas, Rome's puppet who ruled Galilee and Perea. John had ministered in Perea, east of the Jordan, and had even fearlessly denounced Herod's marriage to his brother's ex-wife. Jesus' Baptism and this

time of testing took place in Perea; then Jesus carried out a brief ministry in Judea. When Herod acted against John, Jesus left the vicinity of Jerusalem, the center of Jewish authority, and returned to Galilee, where people generally were more free and receptive.

6. What three elements are to be seen in Mark's summary of Jesus' preaching?

## The Holy Gospel: Mark 8:27-38

The Second Sunday in Lent

February 28, 2021

Jesus asked His disciples about the opinion of others as a way of focusing the disciples' minds on their own convictions. They said some thought of him as:

- *John the Baptist*—John was dead, beheaded by Herod Antipas. But because of Jesus' miracles, a superstitious notion held that John had returned from the dead and was working through Jesus.
- *Elijah*—Malachi's prophecy about Elijah as the Way-Preparer was well known. In the New Testament, John is identified as that Elijah, first by the angel announcing his coming, and then by Jesus Himself.
- *One of the prophets*—Moses' words about God raising up a prophet like him may also have been behind this idea (see Deuteronomy 18:15).

When Jesus asked "Who do you say that I am?" Peter spoke up and boldly confessed, "You are the Christ."

Jesus then began to speak plainly about the suffering and dying that awaited Him. The Greek *dei* is very explicit. Jesus was teaching His disciples that it was *necessary* for these things to happen. But they neither expected nor wanted to hear it.

Later, as Peter told Mark his eyewitness testimony, he was open enough to reveal his downside. Peter admitted that at the time, he hadn't understood about the Christ and His mission in God's saving will. Peter took Jesus aside and *rebuked* Jesus for suggesting that His clash with the religious leaders would end with His suffering and death. Peter and the others had seen Jesus' power in action. Surely Jesus would not let that happen!

"Turning and seeing His disciples" suggests that when Jesus responded to Peter, He turned, first, to put Peter behind Him, and second, to speak so that the others would hear.

15. Why did Jesus call His concerned friend and disciple "Satan"? Why would He want the others to listen in as He spoke these strong words of correction to Peter?

Jesus made it clear that all attempts to reduce the nature of the Christ and His kingdom to earthly, political considerations mean you do not have in mind the things of God but the things of man. In expanding on this, Jesus addressed Himself to the whole crowd of those who were following Him. As we consider His words, we need to think of *ourselves* in that crowd and listen carefully to what He says to us. “If anyone would . . .” The Greek *thelei* places this into the area of the will—“If anyone *wills* to . . . .” Its present tense makes it “If anyone keeps on willing to . . . .”

The Bible is clear that our believing and following Jesus are *not* just a matter of our decision. They are a result of the Father’s drawing and the Holy Spirit’s enabling (see John 6:44; 1 Corinthians 12:3). But Jesus’ words strongly urge us to *make up our minds* about Him, and in that very urging, there is the Father’s drawing and the Spirit’s enabling. God’s Word is always power to make things happen according to His saving will.

16. What are the essential requirements placed on *anyone* who *keeps on willing* to come after Jesus?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
17. What does “deny himself” require as we follow Jesus in faith? (See Philippians 3:7–11.)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
18. What is meant by the “cross” that every disciple must take up? (See Matthew 15:18–21.)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
19. If we are ready and willing to follow Jesus, to what will He inevitably lead us in our daily lives as His disciples? (See Matthew 20:25–28; John 15:12–17.)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
20. In the light of all this, interpret Jesus’ paradoxical statement about saving one’s life and losing one’s life.

21. What kind of circumstances might tempt us to be “ashamed of [Jesus] and of [His] words”? How serious a problem is it when we sidestep opportunities to stand up and be counted for Jesus?

## The Holy Gospel: John 2:13-25

The Third Sunday in Lent

March 7, 2021

Did John record a cleansing of the temple that took place early in Jesus' ministry, or is this the same incident that the synoptic Gospels record as part of Holy Week? Bible scholars are divided about this. All recognize that the Gospels are not just chronological accounts, but were organized by their authors, and this was especially true of the Gospel of John. The synoptics, which are more chronological than John, say nothing about an earlier cleansing. Only John records Jesus' "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." John's explanation that Jesus was referring to His body and his comment that the disciples recalled His words after He was raised from the dead also seem to point to an occasion closer to the time of His death and resurrection. All of these considerations lend weight to the conclusion that there was only one cleansing, and that it took place just before—and precipitated—His arrest and trials and crucifixion. It is likely that John placed the incident as one of the first events in the life and ministry of Jesus to further the point he was making about Jesus.

"Jesus went up to Jerusalem." Jerusalem is some 70 miles south of Capernaum, so in our idiom, we quite naturally say He went *down* to Jerusalem—but not so the Jews.

35. Why did the Jews always speak of going *up* to Jerusalem?

The temple's Court of the Gentiles, an outer section bounded by magnificent colonnades, had, in effect, become a marketplace. Concessionaires sold animals and birds for sacrifices. At the time of the Passover, there were large pens with lambs for purchase for the Passover supper. Money changers traded Jewish half-shekels for coins of the empire so the Jewish men could pay their half-shekel temple tax without using coins that had the emperor's image stamped on them. All this was a convenience for the people, and it brought large sums of money into the temple treasury and made the chief priests wealthy—but it also turned the outer temple court into a busy, noisy, smelly marketplace. Incensed at all of this, Jesus boldly took charge and drove the merchants and the animals out and overturned the tables of the money changers.

36. What reason did Jesus give for His actions? Why didn't the Jewish authorities just arrest Jesus for disrupting the arrangement they had approved and which seemed to benefit everybody?

37. What was the reaction of the disciples to Jesus' unexpected action?

Instead of arresting Jesus, the authorities asked for a miraculous sign by which He could prove His authority to take this bold action. Jesus answered them with a *mashal*, a cryptic statement that requires careful consideration to understand it: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Greek is significant. Earlier, as John referred to the temple, he used the word *hieron*, which meant all the temple structure with all its courts. Here, quoting Jesus, he used *naos*, which pertained only to the inner sanctuary, God's dwelling place. John explained that Jesus was speaking of \_\_\_ as the holy place where deity dwells. Thus John underscored again the truth of the incarnation of the eternal Word, a truth at the center of his purpose in writing his Gospel.

38. Why were the Jewish leaders able to respond only in terms of the temple building in which they were standing? When did Jesus' disciples finally understand and believe the meaning of Jesus' *mashal* and its application to Scripture prophecy?

39. What guidance does this incident give us in our use of the buildings we have dedicated to God for His worship?

40. God does not dwell in the *hieron* of church buildings. What is the *naos* in which He dwells? (See 1 Peter 2:4–5; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20.) What does this say to us for our daily living?

## The Holy Gospel: John 3:14–21

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2021

Jesus said, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” God uses conditions and customs in human history in working out His will and purpose. Had the Jews been an independent nation when the Sanhedrin found Jesus guilty and condemned Him to death, He would have been executed by stoning. But the Roman Empire ruled, and the Romans executed non-Romans by crucifixion. So Jesus spoke of being lifted up, and pointed to the bronze snake on the pole as God’s prototype of this. Elsewhere, John quoted Jesus’ “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself,” and commented, “He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die” (John 12:32–33). The Greek word *dei* spoke of necessity: “the Son of Man *must* be lifted up.” His being lifted up was not a chance result of a turn of events. It was a result of God’s purposeful, saving will— “that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

56. What was the compelling factor behind the necessity of Jesus’ being lifted up on a cross?

57. John 3:16 is probably the most widely known verse of the Bible. Luther called it “the Gospel in miniature” because it states the truths of salvation in one sentence. One preacher said of it: “It is so wonderfully simple that it is simply wonderful.” State the important salvation truths that are inherent in its key words:

*God*  
*loved*  
*world*  
*gave*  
*Son*  
*whoever*  
*believes*  
*perish*  
*eternal life*

Because Jesus was lifted up in atonement for the sins of the world, sin and guilt are no longer the determining factors in human life and death. The question that determines eternal destiny is not “Are you a sinner?” but now is \_\_\_\_.

58. Whether one is a person of faith or of unbelief is evidenced in daily living. What does this Holy Gospel point to as the difference between one who “does wicked things” and one who “does what is true”?

Modern philosophies espoused by and practiced by many today, such as atheistic materialism and secular humanism, do not in themselves encourage a morally reprehensible lifestyle. That may result, however, because they repeat the original sin of making the individual the judge of what is good and what is evil. They tend to be permissive because their value systems are subjective, not objective, and relative, not absolute.

59. According to John’s words in this text, what is missing in the approach of such philosophies to human self-awareness and morality?

## The Holy Gospel: Mark 10:32–45

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2021

Jesus led His disciples and others who followed Him onto the road that pilgrims took from Jericho, low in the Jordan Depression, up to Jerusalem in the mountains, rising through the hills some 3,380 feet over the course of 17 miles. His disciples and the others were surprised that Jesus intended to observe the Passover there—and were fearful of what might happen in this center of the Sanhedrin’s power. Jesus took His disciples aside and told them clearly what lay ahead for Him. His hour had come. The fulfillment of the purpose of His coming was at hand. It was what they feared, but not what they expected.

Mark attached the approach of James and John to Jesus with their request to Jesus’ solemn words. It formed a study in contrasts: their Lord was ready to become the Lamb of God He had come to be, while the two disciples looking for places of prominence. Matthew’s Gospel says that Salome, their mother, was behind it and made the request for them. Mark deals directly with the two brothers. Ultimately, the request was their responsibility. Their approach was typical of supplicants approaching all-powerful Oriental potentates. Their “we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You” suggested that the All- Powerful One was able to grant any request and need not even know in advance what it might be.

Perhaps the fact that James and John had already been given special positions by Jesus in the inner circle encouraged their thinking about position and prominence. Some scholars believe Salome was a sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. That would mean James and John were Jesus’ first cousins, which may have contributed to their expectations. None of this can be firmly established. We know only that they didn’t know what they were asking. They didn’t understand what lay ahead for Jesus, though Jesus had talked to them about it. Jesus gently instructed them again.

72. What is meant by “the cup that I drink” and “the baptism with which I am baptized”? What does their confident “We are able” tell us about James and John?

73. In telling James and John that they would indeed drink the cup and experience the baptism, why did Jesus add that this would not necessarily qualify them for what they wanted?

74. The other disciples saw the brothers as power grabbers and were indignant about their approaching Jesus in this way. What does the disciples' indignation reveal about them?

Jesus again taught them about His paradoxical kingdom. Whoever wants to be great in His kingdom must be least. The Greek is *diakonos*, meaning "one who serves willingly." Whoever wants to be first must be servant of all. The Greek is *doulos*, "one who has no choice in the matter, because it is his master's will that determines his service."

75. What thrust does each of these words give to your being a disciple of Jesus?

76. How may we go about learning this lesson for our own lives in our relationship with Jesus?

**The Holy Gospel: Mark 14 and 15**  
Palm Sunday & The Sunday of the Passion  
March 28, 2021

In the Three-Year Lectionary, the Palm Sunday celebration is preliminary to the Sunday of the Passion emphasis. This is a fitting combination, for the eager reception of Jesus as the promised King, the Son of David, precipitated His arrest, trials, and crucifixion. The Holy Gospel for the Sunday of the Passion is the entire Passion history from Mark. For our purposes, we will focus on sections that show five of the principals in the drama of Jesus' suffering and dying.

**A. The Sanhedrin—Mark 14:55–65**

The 71 members of the Sanhedrin constituted the Jews' supreme court, and were responsible for the final oversight of the religious life of the people. In a night session, contrary to the rules of their own body, they placed Jesus on trial.

88. How did Mark speak of their prejudice as they approached the trial? Why did the false witnesses focus on Jesus' words about destroying the temple?

89. How was Jesus finally put into a position in which they could judge Him to be guilty? Why did they consider His words to be blasphemy?

**B. Governor Pontius Pilate—Mark 15:1–15**

Pilate had a history of difficulties in carrying out political assignments. He was basically on trial by Rome in being named prefect of the Roman province of Judea, and he had made some serious mistakes also there. It was a ready-made opportunity for the Jewish leaders, with influential friends in Rome, to pressure Pilate to do their will.

90. Why did Pilate have to be involved in the verdict against Jesus? What charge did the Sanhedrin bring against Jesus in Pilate's court? Why didn't they repeat the charge of blasphemy for which they had condemned Him?

91. Why did Pilate try to release Jesus? To what lengths did he go in this?

92. Why did he finally satisfy the crowd and order Jesus' crucifixion?

### **C. The Crowd at the Cross—Mark 15:25–32**

When bullied into ordering Jesus' crucifixion, Pilate had the public notice of the charge against Him read "THE KING OF THE JEWS." John tells us the Jewish leaders tried to get him to change this, but Pilate, probably wanting to salvage some sense of his authority by one-upping them, insisted that it remain as written (see John 19:19–22).

93. What was the effect of the notice on passersby and on the religious leaders?

### **D. God—Mark 15:33–34**

The setting was dramatic: from noon until 3:00 p.m., the daylight was darkened. From out of the gloomy darkness there came the voice of Jesus, crying out the words of Psalm 22: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

94. What was it that the eternal Son of God was experiencing in this "eternal moment" on the cross?

### **E. The Faithful Women—Mark 15:40–47**

Though it was the faithful women who had cared for Jesus' needs in Galilee and who watched in sadness at the cross, they had to stand aside while someone with more influence, Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, stepped forward to acknowledge his faith in Jesus and arrange for the entombment of His body. John tells us that Nicodemus, another member of the Sanhedrin, who had carried out his own private investigation of Jesus, stepped forward to join Joseph in the hurried procedures.

95. Why was haste required in placing Jesus' body into Joseph's tomb?