

An Opportune Time

12 December 2017



It's boiling hot. It's freezing cold. He hasn't eaten for six weeks. He's completely alone, except for the animals – poisonous ones hiding under rocks, fanged ones watching from caves. Sound fun? That's when Satan rocks up. He prods, tempts, tests, taunts. Quotes Scripture. Offers shortcuts. Appeals to self-gratification, self-preservation, self-promotion. Jesus refuses, resists, plays by God's rules. Passes the test.

The details of the temptation in the desert could only have been provided by Jesus Himself, and are outlined by Matthew, Mark and Luke in their gospel accounts. It's Luke, however, with his physician's eye for detail, who adds an intriguing ending to the exchange, and it's found in Luke 4:13.

*'When the devil had finished all this tempting,' Luke wrote, 'he left Him until **an opportune time.**'*

Temptation and Timing

Opportune. You'll find that same word used across different Bible translations, whether NIV, ESV, RSV or NASV. In other words, the devil was prepared to wait for the right moment; the point at which the conditions were again stacked in his favour. This tells us something very important about the Satan: he understands the strategy of timing, and he's prepared to wait until it suits his plan. He's not just randomly flinging everything at the wall to see what sticks, but he knows that there are moments when our defences are down, and that's when he'll be ready to act.

And he did. Consider that awkward conversation in Matthew 16:21-28, also known as Peter's 'Get behind me, Satan!' moment. Ever wonder why Jesus had such a strong reaction? It was another opportune time for the devil to entice Him away from His purpose. The devil had waited and picked the opportunity when he thought Jesus would be vulnerable.

He's been doing the same with the entire human race ever since.

Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, takes off your relish for spiritual things...that thing is sin to you

Temptation in Times of Rest

My calendar tells me that we're now in the month of December. In theory, it's just another month, but it's also a month like no other. In South Africa, it means holidays, beach weather, food, activities, shopping malls, family reunions and spending money. It's such a wonderful time, but can be such a weird time. We need an escape from structure and routine, but also need to stay disciplined and focused; we need to relax, but also to be alert; we need to dial out, but also to stay tuned in.

Many young students leave the cities they've lived in for the year and head back to their hometowns, where old temptations and fractured families await them. Everyone seems to be spending time with loved ones, and those who are lonely can be tempted to go out and find someone to love, for fear of missing out. There are so many pleasures to be enjoyed – many of them healthy, but many unhelpful.

In short, it's an opportune time for so many of us.

I have so often hurried into a break that I forgot that the devil doesn't take one.

About three hundred years ago, Susanna Wesley was approached by her son, John, who was only a little boy at the time. He was not yet one of the greatest preachers the world had ever known, but he had a big question for his mother:

'What is sin?'

It was a profound question for a child to ask, and he got an equally profound reply:

'Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, takes off your relish for spiritual things,' she told him. **'Whatever increases the authority of the body over the mind, that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may seem in itself.'**

I feel like three centuries ago, Susanna Wesley described the ways I often try to relax. I want to be entertained, but often switch my mind onto autopilot and drop my guard. I want to stand on the beach watching everybody around me, but swimsuits keep getting smaller every year. It's so easy for me to get swept up into a worldly way of thinking that I've often come out on the other side of a holiday feeling like I lost ground, because I didn't realise that while I was trying to enjoy something legitimate, the enemy was leveraging his opportunity. I have so often hurried into a break that I forgot that the devil doesn't take one.

...recreation is God's idea and it doesn't have to be destructive if we do it with Him

I'm not some ascetic monk who believes that fun is wrong or that denying ourselves enjoyment makes us more godly. I don't believe we should walk around like we've been baptised in lemon

juice. I believe what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6:17; that God *'richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment.'* I believe that rest and recreation is God's idea and it doesn't have to be destructive if we do it with Him and not independently of Him.

An Opportune Time for God

And so here's the good news: if the holiday season presents an opportune time for the devil, it's also an opportune time for God. The devil may be waiting to tempt, but God is ready to strengthen and envision, and the key is coming to Him first. *'Submit yourselves, then, to God,'* James wrote in the fourth chapter of his letter. *'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.'* That's the sequence: first embrace God and His ways, then we can reject the devil and his ways. The devil couldn't gain a hold over Jesus' heart or mind because Jesus was given over to God first. He didn't gallivant around doing His own thing and then try to resist the devil; He actively gave Himself to God's purposes.

'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ,' wrote Paul in Colossians 3:1-3, *'set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.'*

As many of us head into the holidays, it's the pleasures of this life, not the pain, that will present an opportune moment for the devil. But Jesus showed us that we don't have to give in to him for a moment. And so we give ourselves fully to God and we anticipate the snares of the enemy. As we rest, we stay alert and awake. We enjoy what the summer holidays have to offer, but we find our greatest enjoyment in doing it all with the Lover of our hearts.

Let's make it an opportune time for God.

Photo by [Nikos Zacharoulis](#) on [Unsplash](#)