

The Other Thirty-Seven Days: Notes from Jesus' Journal

Luke 4:1-11

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As you probably know, there is a continuum between introversion and extroversion, the tendencies of not needing much in the way of human interaction, and needing a lot. Unless you are on the extreme introvert end of the continuum, you may find it challenging to be alone for even 40 minutes. Four days might as well be an eternity. And forty days? Forget about it. And yet, that is how long Jesus spent alone in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan. We know about the three famous temptations, but Luke tells us that Jesus was tempted the whole time. And how long did those famous temptations last? If the length of the recorded conversation is any indication, they were over almost before they began. So Jesus had a lot of time out there alone in the desert to do something. But what was that something? Author Frederick Beuchner describes that time by saying that, "Jesus went off alone in the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself what it meant to be Jesus." Even assuming that the temptations took three entire days, what did Jesus ask himself all that time? What did he do all by himself for the other thirty-seven days? Well, fortunately enough for us, a recent archeological dig in Israel has uncovered a record of those days in Jesus' very own words. Through great skill and cunning, I managed to obtain a copy, and you won't believe what he has to say:

Day 1: Felt unbelievably restless, like I had swallowed a large metal object and was surrounded by even larger magnets, each pulling me in a different direction. Then, finally, one of them won out over the others and drew me west and west and still farther west until I ended up in the wilderness near Jericho. Rocks here, nothing but rocks and time. Couldn't see myself turning around just yet to be buffeted again by those magnets, so decided to stay awhile. We'll see how long I can last out here with no food; maybe I can go forty days. That's a good, round Biblical number. Beautiful out here. God's country.

Day 2: Haven't seen anyone yet, but I am definitely not alone. Besides the scorpions and lizards, I am sure there is a presence out here with me, sort of like a lurking shadow. Not sure what it is yet, but I guess I'll find out soon enough.

Day 3: Beautiful sunrise this morning. Starting to get pretty hungry, might even say famished. But it is good for the soul. There are a lot of other people who feel this way all the time. I need to hold on to that thought.

Day 4: The cactus is starting to look pretty tasty. Glad I have some water left. If I remember from my biology class, I must be running out of glucose by now. I think I begin to use up ketones next.

Day 7: Boy, could I go for some Baba Ganoush right about now. Kinda makes me understand why the Israelites ganged up on Moses and Aaron for making them leave behind the great cucumbers, melons and leeks of Egypt, for the bland manna of the wilderness. No wonder they kept pressing on to the land of

milk and honey. They were probably pretty hungry. Hunger will make people think about strange things, even about doing things they shouldn't. But I am holding on.

Day 11: My tunic is beginning to feel a little loose. Must be burning some fat now. My head feels lighter too, but not from hunger. Rather, I've been freed from a lot of stray thoughts I'd been having, like how my mother is going to survive if I don't continue in the furniture making trade. She doesn't need very much to live on, but the prices of everything seem to be going up everyday and my brothers have been out of work for some time now. I think she will be just fine, but I do worry. She has always been so good about trusting in God, even back when she was really living on the edge with my father, well, my stepfather, when we all had to hightail it to Egypt. I'll have to have a talk with her when I get back to Nazareth, and let her know that I'll be needing to step out of the business for a while. I hope she will understand. Hey, little scorpion, watch out!

Day 15: Well, it has been two weeks out here now and I think I figured out what that presence was out here with me. Turns out it's the Adversary and this afternoon he strolls up with a couple of rocks in his hand and has the nerve to challenge me to a duel! Change these rocks into bread, he says. Well, I put him in his place! Told him I didn't need no stinkin' bread when I can feast on the Word of God! I admit, the thought of some nice, warm bread was pretty appealing, but then I remembered the nice warm feeling in my soul every time I remember the ancient

words about all God has done to bring us this far. Interesting how when you eat bread, it's gone, but God's word never runs out. There is always more.

Day 19: Almost half way there. This has been pretty cool, really. Lots of unexpected benefits. I had never explored this part of Israel in such detail. I've had time to see things I never noticed before, just too busy I guess. This area around Mount Quarantania is pretty interesting. I'd guess it's around 1200 feet to the top here where I am sitting writing this. There are even several caves, in which I have passed the night when the wind was particularly fierce. They reminded me of the prophet Elijah and the night he spent hiding from Jezebel, and how he heard that still small voice that told him what he must do. I've heard something similar out here, several times, since it is so quiet. I can't say as I miss the noise of the city. In the silence, I've heard God calling me to do something with my life. It is becoming clearer every day.

Day 24: Sorry I haven't written in a while. It's just that I've been recovering from this experience I had with the Adversary. So get this: we trek up to the top of the mountain and he shows me all the kingdoms of the world and says they are mine for the asking. All I have to do is bow down and worship him. Says it has all been given over to him and therefore it is his to give away as he chooses. I have to admit, the lack of food has made me delirious at times, and the prospect was intriguing, so I listened a while -- before politely declining. I mean, I could do a lot with all these messed up little kingdoms. I do think I have the skills to keep it all

under control, certainly with less bloodshed than Caesar. Now, that guy has a real complex. Who died and made him Emperor? But the tradeoff was just too high, so I reminded the Adversary that Scripture says, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him,” and he didn’t stick around much longer. Just goes to show you that just because it may be good to do something, it doesn’t mean it’s the right thing to do.

Day 26: A day of gratitude. Woke up remarkably refreshed for not having eaten in almost a month. Must be something in the water. Thank God for the water! I found a little spring that has been keeping me going. I didn’t even have to hit a rock with my staff to make the water flow out, like Moses had to. It just seemed to be there waiting just for me. It’s not a gusher, that spring, but it has worn a deep groove in the rock it has been flowing for so long. Kinda reminds me of my cousin John baptizing all those people in the Jordan River. Maybe that water will keep flowing their whole lives and shape them into the instruments of God they should be. That’s how I feel about these 26 days so far, that I am being formed into what God wants me to be. It’s been really tough, but I feel like I am taking shape.

Day 31: I am doing a lot of praying while I’m out here. In fact, I’m praying like I’ve never prayed before. Part of it is that I don’t have a whole lot of energy to do much climbing or walking, so I spend a lot of the day talking with God. One of the cool things is that I’ve been able to spend more time each day actively listening to God, instead of blathering on. People have always said I’m a pretty good talker,

going back to when I was twelve in the Temple, but this time in the desert has made me a much better listener too. Somehow, I think that will come in handy some day.

Day 33: One week to go! I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. But that somehow makes it harder. I miss my family and I'm tired of feeling weak and faint. I'm beginning to wonder why I even decided to do this. Everyday the Adversary puts something out there that makes going home pretty appealing. Mostly it is creature comforts stuff: images of food, a bed, hanging out with friends. But sometimes it is more intense. I've been having this recurring dream of leading a battle against the Romans. I've got a sword and shield and everything, hundreds of men behind me, and I can even see victory. They are putting a garland of olive branches on my head. The crowds are cheering, and there are beautiful women everywhere looking on me adoringly. Must be left over images from the last visit of the Adversary. If I'm honest, I have to admit it beats small town life by a mile. But even while I am in the midst of being the main character in my dream, I can step outside of it and watch myself in the dream, and I don't look happy. I look worried. I look much older. I keep looking over my shoulder. Maybe that makes it easier to not give in, knowing the consequences. I wonder if everyone has that kind of foresight?

Day 40: Well, I was just starting to make my way toward home when there's that Adversary again, and this time he takes me to the very top of the temple! It is

pretty high up there. Good thing I'm not afraid of heights. Anyway, he challenges me again, this time to jump off, because he says he knows that God will take care of me, sending angels to keep me from harm. Don't trust me, he says, trust God and what it says in Scripture. But I don't need to prove anything to this guy. I trust God enough that I don't need to do something stupid. So I tell him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test,'" and just like that, I am back in the desert. I thought maybe I'd just be able to stay in Jerusalem and not have to walk home, but no such luck. On the way home, however, I reflected on the whole experience. I feel changed. My body is different, my mind is clearer, my vision of what's true and important is sharper, the sharpest it's ever been. I feel like I can overcome any challenge after surviving for this many days on just water and the Spirit. I was reading back through this journal I've been keeping and remembered how at the beginning of this whole trip I felt pulled in a dozen different directions. Now I feel pulled in only one direction, towards God's kingdom. Now that's a long trip too, but worth the journey. I'm looking forward to it.

And so ends Jesus' journal of the other thirty-seven days. Now, scholars who have studied this new document say it confirms what we previously thought about Jesus' time in the desert, now with a little more depth, that he entered the desert led by the Spirit and left it prepared for the assignment God had for him to save the world. They also say that while it is clear this journal is most definitely not Scripture, it is quite beneficial devotionally to reflect on someone else's

intentional period of preparation, to inform our own. They also say that it is remarkable how much in common Jesus' experience has with those Christians who have been intentional during the season of Lent. You can be the judge of all that.

Amen.