

The Wilderness, III

We left off with the notion that we would need a deep conviction of the truth of the Word of God in order to do battle with our enemies, the world-rulers of darkness. And the enemy knows this and thus has waged an all-out assault on this conviction, and the assault was waged by experts with PhD's. *Heilsgeschichte* it was called – the Higher Criticism; accompanied by Form Criticism and Redaction Criticism.

These approaches to Scripture are founded on just a few principles. First of these is rationalism, which assumes that anything which appears as a miracle in the Bible is simply a natural occurrence told in the form of myth. The higher critics think that as a literary form myth contains much truth to be sure, but if something is recorded in scripture that is not a natural occurrence then it is a theological construct and has no basis in scientific truth but is only a religious truth. Secondly, to understand the forms of Scripture in the Higher Criticism you must approach them without any faith at all.

When these lousy ideas which were born in the Lutheran church made their way into the Catholic Church, they undermined the foundation of moral and dogmatic theology, and thus the destruction of Sodom was viewed by the Form Critics as a simple volcanic eruption, and the main fault of the inhabitants was a lack of hospitality. My formation in Scripture was saturated with this stuff – and it was given the highest approval. The Ven. Pius XII and Bl. Paul VI gave this criticism their endorsement, but they said these new means of understanding the Scriptures could be used only when accompanied by the commentaries of the Fathers of the Church. This was not done in seminary formation from the fifties well into the nineties.

By the way, the founder of New Testament Form Criticism was a Lutheran pastor named Rudolf Bultmann. He was an honorable man in many ways and started out as a good believing minister. He served the German Wehrmacht in the First World War as a chaplain in the trenches, and was decorated for bravery. But his embrace of Form Criticism undermined his belief in the Word of God, and at the end of his life he was playing with Tarot cards, since the human person is made to seek what is above, and as Chesterton put it, if you don't worship the one true God you'll worship anything.

At my seminary one day one of our professors of Scripture who was charmed by Form Criticism was speaking about the time when our Lord walking on water, with St. Peter following suit. The professor explained this was not a miracle, but that there was a sandbar just under the surface of the water which the gospel writers couldn't see. I got into some trouble with the professor since I pointed out that this would be an even greater miracle, given that fresh water lakes don't have sandbars. Rivers and creeks do. And the Sea of Galilee is a big freshwater lake, so the angels would have had to be up all night hauling in buckets of sand to build a sandbar. All this nonsense of course had a huge role to play in the present scandals, since if you don't believe in the teaching of Scripture; you certainly won't bother to live according to its precepts.

So for anyone venturing out into the wilderness, use instead the saints and their view of Scripture, in particular the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. They have unbounded confidence in the Word of God, and that is what is needed to do battle in the wilderness. As our Lord taught us, it is *out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks* (Lk. 6:45), and so we will need to put the Word of God into our hearts in abundance, if we are to be successful in our battle with the enemy.

But let us return for a moment to the time that Christ spent in the wilderness. Why did He go there? Because He was *led* into the wilderness by the Spirit of God. The Greek word *anago* here has a stronger sense than led; it can mean compelled or even driven. As He was driven, this lets us know that this was not going to be some pleasant mountain retreat. This will be 40 days of temptation from the power of hell in a very inhospitable place.

And remember the word "temptation" means "testing." The devil was testing out there in the desert; conducting a series of experiments, to find something out. The enemy wanted to know if Christ was, or was not, the Son of God. That is, the devil wanted to know if his reign on the earth was about to be brought to an end.

By the way, how strange the role of devils in salvation history! It was devils who first proclaimed Christ by His title, when they spoke in the synagogue through a possessed man at Capharnaum. "Art thou come to destroy us? I know who thou art, the Holy One of God." So in the wilderness, they did not know for certain who Jesus was, but they guessed it, and though the experiments in the desert were inconclusive, they pointed to a truth which hell feared most – that the conqueror of hell had at last come to earth in human flesh.

We can imagine them thinking, "Then is this God incarnate, or is this just a man singularly favored by God?" They knew at least the latter was true, since humans cannot go without food for forty days and remain in patience and good cheer. So they devised several tests, the first of these having to do with stones and bread. They thought to themselves, if He is incarnate God, then He will have the power to turn stones into bread. If He is just a man, then He will think He has the power to do so, or that He can persuade God to do so. If He is God, then the test will fall off Him like a dart thrown against a stone wall. But if He is just a man, then He will succumb to the temptation, and use His miraculous powers like the prophets, in order to relieve His hunger.

What a trap this was! Here was a man starving, perhaps dying of hunger, and the devils knew well what men will do and how they will act if they are starving. Anything Christ did to relieve his hunger and the devils would be successful, and Our Lord will have played His hand. So they used the stones lying about; flat, rounded stones of various sizes in that area lying on the sand. We can therefore imagine them saying to Christ, in a soothing, sympathetic, reasonable tone: "See those round, flat stones? They look like loaves of bread don't they? You could turn them into bread; bread as satisfying to a hungry man as the manna was to the Israelites of old during their difficult sojourn in the desert!"

And our Lord rose up and with fierce light in His sacred eyes responded with terrible authority: "The sojourn in the desert? Moses fasted in the desert, so that he could receive the Old Law, which was written on two flat stone tablets. These flat stones in the wilderness are waiting to receive the New Law...and for that Law, the souls of men are hungry."

Non in solo pane! He said. *That* is how to answer such temptation. "Not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God." Our Lord came to satisfy something higher, something more than mere bodily cravings. And were it not for the wilderness, this great wisdom might not be ours.