



THE ACHE FOR
MEANING

*How the Temptations of Christ Reveal
Who We Are and What We're Seeking*

TOMMY BROWN

That one line—the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil—haunts me. And yet in these pages, I'm invited to follow, too, further into this terrifying, merciful terrain. Probing both Scripture and our soul's story, Brown unfolds how our elder brother descended into the wilderness we all must enter and confronted the primal questions that lurk in the secret places of our heart. Here is a wise and gentle pen, providing ancient, sturdy wisdom as balm to every human longing.

WINN COLLIER, director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination, author of *A Burning in My Bones* and *Love Big, Be Well*

Brown writes, "In my suffering, I came to understand that sometimes we experience God's power through his protection, but in a broken world, sometimes we experience God's power through his consolation." These words are not quick fixes and don't offer fake escape. Instead, *The Ache for Meaning* gives us a refreshing spaciousness in suffering and offers an invitation to move more fully into people of faith living in the ordinary hard of life. Brown brings realistic, clear, and grounded hope and reminds us that Jesus meets us right where we are.

SARA BILLUPS, author of *Orphaned Believers*

Like a scalpel, a good question has the power to cut to the quick, exposing the sicknesses that lie just beneath the surface of our lives. And like a skilled surgeon, Tommy Brown leverages that most cryptic and evocative of Gospel

texts, the temptation of Christ, to show how the questions posed to Christ are in fact *our* questions—*Will I have enough? Am I enough? Do I matter?* In so doing, he exposes the lies, fears, compulsions, and contradictions that might otherwise drive our lives into ruin to the gaze of the Healer. A wise and much-needed book.

ANDREW ARNDT, pastor of New Life East, author of *All Flame* and *Streams in the Wasteland*

Tommy Brown understands the kind of questions about meaning that many of us ponder. I enjoyed his blend of disarmingly honest personal stories, insightful wisdom about Christian identity, and creative engagement with Jesus' three temptations. Brown has a Christ-centered understanding of power and control that will challenge readers, and I appreciate his suggestions for spiritual practices to address the issues raised by each temptation. I was sad when I got to the end of the book—I was so enjoying pondering questions of identity and meaning along with him.

REV. DR. LYNNE M. BAAB, author of *Sabbath Keeping* and *Joy Together*

In this personal and engaging book, Tommy Brown uses the temptation of Christ to wrestle deeply with three of life's most important questions: *Will I have enough? Am I enough? Do I matter?* Throughout he sheds new light on Scripture and offers much wisdom for us to live more virtuous lives. Highly recommend!

DR. CHRISTIAN B. MILLER, A. C. Reid Professor of Philosophy at Wake Forest University

Each section of Tommy Brown's book opens with a question that every one of us ponders deeply and out of the sight of others: *Will I have enough? Am I enough? Do I matter?* Tommy opens his own life to reveal how he has struggled to answer each of these questions and then leads us not only to see the invitations Jesus extends to help us answer these questions but also to engage in practices that allow us to say yes to these invitations. You will be encouraged in that deep, lasting way after reading Tommy's book, and your perspective will expand so that you really begin to embrace the security, worth, and belovedness you have in Christ.

KELLYE FABIAN STORY, writer, lawyer, pastor, cultural observer, and author of *Sacred Questions* and *Holy Vulnerability*

Weaving personal and real-life stories into thoughtful reflections on Jesus in the Gospels, Tommy Brown helps us reimagine the temptation of Jesus around the fundamental issues of our identity—issues surrounding security, approval, and power. This kind of spiritual reading of the temptations gives us the opportunity to enter more fully into the virtues of trust, gratitude, and meekness that we might become more like Jesus. Tommy is a faithful pastor and guide, providing practices that ground readers in each of these virtues. *The Ache for Meaning* is a compelling invitation for self-reflection and growth into Christlikeness.

DEREK VREELAND, pastor and author of *Centering Jesus*

We don't all get there at the same time, but boy howdy we all get there, to that stifling wilderness moment, maybe even season, when whatever money and success and power and influence we've accrued feel achingly empty. It's a classic case of getting the course before the heart—not so much *what* needs we have but *how* we try and meet them. With pastoral wit and wisdom, Tommy Brown's *The Ache for Meaning* mines the riches in the wilderness temptations of Christ. The three questions Jesus faced and the subsequent responses he gave provide life-saving guidance for anyone high-centered in the wilderness. For we all get there, boy howdy we do.

JOHN BLASE, poet and author



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The Ache for Meaning: How the Temptations of Christ Reveal Who We Are and What We're Seeking

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To Kevin Frack



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Everywhere is desert.

THOMAS MERTON,

Thoughts in Solitude

THE THREE QUESTIONS WE'VE ALWAYS ASKED



I REPEATEDLY REARRANGED my office at work. I tried new places for the desk—back wall, over to the left, across to the right. And then there were the chairs. Should I position them in front of my desk, or perhaps in the corner with a table between? One felt too formal; the other not formal enough. Over and over again, I rearranged my office, not sure what I was looking for or what was missing. All I knew was that I hoped shuffling furniture would spark creativity, or at least a desire to show up to that space and do work I no longer found meaningful.

The company had provided nice furniture for our offices, but it was fake nice—engineered wood with a polished surface that crumbles when cracked.

That wood felt like a mirror.

From outward appearances, all was well with me, but beneath the surface, fissures expanded. So often I felt out of place in this corporate world. The power dynamics were disorienting, and I could rarely figure out where I stood. Just when I felt secure, something would happen that shook my confidence. I knew something was wrong, but I had no idea where to begin to make it right.

You can only rearrange furniture so many ways before you must face the possibility that the problem is not a lack of feng shui. My problem was that I was seeking answers to questions I could not name. Deep questions, embedded somewhere indiscernible in my soul, leaving me longing to resolve my uneasiness and unfulfillment.

I'd hoped my current job would infuse my life with meaning and answer these questions for me. The job before that, I'd wanted my mentor-boss to answer them for me. The job before that, I'd wanted my accomplishments to answer them for me. Every try, every grasp for meaning, every flailing search for solid ground—nothing was enough.

Here I was, nearly forty years old, and not only did I not have the answers, but I couldn't even ask the questions that haunted me inside that fake-furniture office.



The indefinable ache, the longing, the unspoken and unnamed need—it's part of the human condition. We know we're looking for something, but we don't know what it is.

We might know how we got to where we are, but we don't know what to do next.

There's a story in Genesis where the Lord promises an elderly, childless man named Abram that he will have countless offspring.¹ A decade later, he remains childless, and his wife, Sarai, proposes that Abram sleep with her servant, Hagar, which he does.

Hagar becomes pregnant, and animosity simmers between her and Sarai, who now has what she wants but doesn't want what she has.² Under duress, Hagar flees into the wilderness, stopping to rest at a spring.

An angel finds her and asks, "Where have you come from and where are you going?"

Hagar responds, "I am fleeing from . . ."

She knows where she's come from, but she doesn't know where she's going.

Before I worked in my fake-furniture office, I was a pastor. I wasn't the *real* pastor, as some enjoyed reminding me. I was the person the real pastor hires to do the day-to-day operational stuff. Some thrive doing this type of ministerial work. It suffocated my sense of calling.

The challenge was, I was good at it. I created so many systems and programs and oversaw so many employees that I was very useful—indispensable, some said—to the church. But being useful was using up my best energies.

I grew to resent the church because much of what I was doing had nothing to do with the things that I felt called to do—things like preaching, teaching, and providing

spiritual guidance. I had grown so focused on being useful and helping others accomplish what they wanted that I'd become disconnected from what it was that I wanted. After all, I'd seen what happens when pastors aren't useful—they're asked to *find the will of God somewhere else*. The thought of income loss, of not making ends meet, seemed like a fate worse than death. This fearful grasping for safety, for having enough, wore me down. Eventually, the responsibilities on my job description as a pastor proved to be the gravest challenge to my calling to, in fact, *be* a pastor.

Wearied, I told my boss that I'd lost my way and I needed a change, that I needed to reclaim a sense of doing and being what I was called to do and be. So I left the church and went to work for the company with the fake office furniture.

On some level, I didn't want to leave the church. I loved the people with whom I worked and those in the congregation, but I knew I couldn't get clarity if I remained.

I was fleeing, and though I knew the location of my new office, I had no idea where I was actually going.



Sometimes I went for slow jogs. I was suffering from anxiety, which had never really plagued me before, and I'd heard that exercise helped.

But there was one problem—my head was still attached to my slow-jogging body. And I was out on a trail without my convenient distractions: books, problems to solve,

dopamine hits from social media—all the things that could momentarily soothe my anxious mind.

I'd heard that meditation helped. So I tried to meditate, but I ended up ruminating on more things to be anxious about.

Most of the things that should have helped ended up making me feel even more defeated.

I found only one space where my mind was focused and calm. In my study at home, I could put a song on repeat and open my laptop and write—and I was good for hours, fully absorbed in the moment, even to the point of forgetting to eat until dinnertime.

This one practice became a haven. Even though day by day I had to leave this space and rearrange my fake-furniture office, it felt like here all the furniture of my mind was in its proper place.

One morning in my study, the questions I could not name began to whisper in words that I could faintly discern. It was like they were finally ready to be seen, ready to be named.

As I sat at my solid-wood desk, by the window overlooking a row of mature junipers, I opened the Bible.

To knock the religious edges off this moment: You should know that there were no goose bumps, no sense of Divine Presence—nothing surreal. Just me at my desk, opening the book I'd opened countless times before.

When you've been trained as a pastor, it's part of the territory to know the Scriptures. You spend untold hours

with this book, and eventually the stories become familiar. Familiarity, I'm told, breeds unfamiliarity, and unfamiliarity breeds contempt.³ I hadn't devolved into contempt for Scripture, but at best I had become so familiar with it that it hardly intrigued me.

The Scripture I opened to that day had worn thin to transparency after years of sermons. But this time, in this place, with rare silence of mind, something happened.



Matthew 3:13-4:11

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written,

“Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth
of God.”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you,"

and

"On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone."

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

"You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve."

Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

Slowly, devils leave.

As I sat in my study and read Christ's temptations, emotions welled within me. I was reading the words written on a page in front of me, but the words were speaking to the deep questions written on my soul.

I wept.

I wept for a long time.

I wept for lost time.

I wept like I imagine Hagar weeping, running as far and as fast as she can from pain, knowing what she is running from but not what or where she is running to.

Then, in all that running from something, she runs smack into the divine.

And she says, "Would I have looked here for the one who sees me?"⁴

There's something about being seen—about knowing that you're not alone and that you matter—that fills you with hope, even if you're not yet out of the woods. Sometimes this happens in ways you never would have expected. Amid all my pain and longing, as I gazed on Christ's temptations, I was shocked to catch a glimpse of what I was really seeking.

I found my deepest fears and greatest hopes on that page. As I read of the devil tempting Jesus to abandon his identity, I was confronted with my most debased instincts and my most primal passions.

And suddenly, this scene was everywhere, all the time. I began to hear echoes from Jesus' wilderness temptations⁵ in conversations I was having, in challenges I was facing. As I

returned to this story over and over, I also saw my questions with greater clarity.

I found a whole new way to see the world.

And once you see, you can't unsee.

This passage of Scripture felt like an invitation to a journey of exploring my questions, and through my questions, what it was I was truly seeking.

Journey is such an overplayed word, but I can't find a better one to describe the path that this passage set me on—a path I've walked for many years now and one that I'll continue to follow. It's a transformational journey, one of learning to walk in contentment, fulfillment, and hope.

Some journeys are about destinations. I quickly discerned that this one was not. This journey was about invitations—invitations to explore the questions that began to shape who I was and what I was seeking. As the poet Rilke encouraged, you must live these sorts of questions.⁶ The point isn't to quickly find a correct answer; the point is to experience transformation as you live with the questions in the foreground of your heart and mind. And eventually, in living them well, the questions become a sort of answer in themselves.

As I lived the questions, I realized that the frustration I felt as a pastor and the meaninglessness I felt in the fake-furniture office were because none of the answers I'd been given could guide me through this wilderness I was wandering.

*When all the answers failed, ✦ ✦
the questions guided me home.*

Money couldn't buy the security I needed.
Success couldn't provide the approval I desired.
Power and control corroded my soul.

But when all the answers failed, the questions guided me home.



The passage about Jesus' temptations, which doesn't contain even one question, revealed to me my questions, the places in my soul that longed to be noticed. While you could express these three questions in different ways, this is how I saw them, and how I see them still:

- *Will I have enough?*
- *Am I enough?*
- *Do I matter?*

As I considered the questions over time, as I conversed with friends and provided spiritual guidance for others, I realized these aren't just *my* questions. These are *our* questions—they echo in every human soul. And though we're all asking these three questions in different ways, we hardly—if ever—voice them.

Because if we asked these questions aloud, we'd risk vulnerability.

And vulnerability opens us to the possibility of rejection.

But vulnerability also opens us to the possibility of solidarity.

And solidarity means we're not alone.

It means *you're* not alone.

You can trust that we're all seeking the same things, asking the same three questions in one form or another. The most personal desires are the most universal, and the most universal desires are the most personal.⁷

And the most ancient.

These three questions drove the plot that led to tragedy in the Garden with Adam and Eve. They're the questions Abraham faced on his trek to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac. They're the same ones Moses and Israel experienced during their wilderness wanderings.

Suffice it to say that once you see the questions, you'll see them in some form in chapter after chapter of Scripture.

And you'll see them in every chapter of your life. As author Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote of the wilderness temptations in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*,

For in these three questions all of subsequent human history is as if brought together into a single whole and foretold; three images are revealed that will take in all the insoluble historical contradictions of human nature over all the earth.⁸

In other words, the three temptations Jesus faced represent every temptation you will face in life, every temptation humankind has ever faced. They are the three areas where each of us is tempted to meet healthy human needs in unhealthy ways.

Spiritual director and teacher Ruth Haley Barton explains:

The mind works hard to control and manage reality and has its own plans for remedying the human situation outside of Christ and abandonment to his divine will. Thomas Keating, in his work on the true self and the false, describes these plans as “emotional programs for happiness” based on childhood instinctual needs and all the ways we compensate for these unfulfilled needs. He identifies these basic, primal impulses as the following needs:

- safety/security/survival
- affection/esteem/approval
- power and control

All of these are legitimate human needs. The sin problem has to do with the fact that we have all developed unconscious ways of meeting these needs for ourselves on our own terms . . . apart from God.⁹

With each temptation, the devil invited Jesus to meet a healthy need—security, approval, or control—on his own terms and in his own power. I love pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson’s take on what transpired:

The devil’s three temptations of Jesus all had to do with ways and means. Every one of the devil’s goals

was excellent. The devil had an unsurpassed vision statement. But the ways and means were incompatible with the ends. Jesus saw through it at once.¹⁰

The issue was not what needs Jesus had but how he would meet them. The same applies to us.

The issue was not *what* needs Jesus had but *how* he would meet them. The same applies to us.



We'll explore the depths of these questions and temptations—and what God has for us in them—throughout the coming chapters. But before we're too far along the trail, I want us to understand the big picture of what's happening in each of the three Temptations:¹¹

- The first temptation—turn these stones into bread (Matthew 4:3)—addresses the first question: *Will I have enough?* It's the temptation to strive for security. It's based in the fear that we will not have enough, which causes us to seek security in our own efforts and abilities to produce, provide, and make something happen. This temptation leads us away from contentment.
- The second temptation—throw yourself down from the Temple (Matthew 4:5-6)—addresses the second

question: *Am I enough?* Here's the temptation to perform for approval. It's based in the belief that we do not measure up, which causes us to burn immense energy and resources to impress others, keep up appearances, and gain approval. This temptation leads us away from fulfillment.

- The third temptation—bow down and worship (Matthew 4:9)—addresses the third question: *Do I matter?* Here we see the seduction to exercise power to control. It's based in our search for significance, which causes us to seek unhealthy control over people, positions, and problems. This temptation leads us away from hope in God alone.

We're in this together, asking the same three questions, facing the same three temptations, trying to meet the same three needs in one form or another. To begin our journey, we'll discover how Jesus' sense of identity gave him the strength to stand in the face of adversity. Then we'll unpack the Temptations one by one:

- exploring the core need and question each temptation exposes;
- understanding the mindset that Jesus possessed, allowing him to resist each temptation; and
- developing an ancient spiritual practice that Jesus performed to strengthen this mindset.

My commitment to you is that I'll offer guidance by only speaking of what I've personally experienced as true and helpful. And while I can't say everything that needs to be said about any one topic, I'll leave nothing off the table that has led to personal renewal.

This transformational journey can change your heart and help you become a more joyful, liberated, and confident person. These are not empty promises; these are invitations to become more like Jesus—the One who showed us what it means to be truly human.

Before long, you'll learn to look at any situation and ask yourself, *What valid need—security, approval, or control—am I trying to meet in an unhealthy way and on my own terms?* You'll begin to discern which of the three core questions—which of the three temptations, that is—you're facing.

How far you take this journey is up to you. Just know that you'll never arrive at a place where you feel like you've mastered much of anything in the spiritual life, because when it comes to following the Master, we are all novices.

As you see Christ's wilderness temptations take shape in various forms in your daily life and interactions, you'll awaken to the reality that everywhere is wilderness, and we're all walking in it.

But we're not walking alone.

If we're listening, if our inner ears are attuned to what the Spirit is doing and saying, we'll hear echoes from Christ's temptations that show us who we are and what we're seeking. And in the end, perhaps we'll not only hear the echoes

from the Temptations but also the Voice that reminds us, as it reminded him, that we are beloved sons and daughters of God.

Now, into the wilderness.