



The King of the Wilderness

Matthew 4:1-11

Grace Church | 4.3.22

This is our fifth week in Lent exploring our theme of Wilderness. Again remember Lent is a time of fasting and repentance to prepare us for Easter. Four weeks ago we considered how we entered into the wilderness of this world: because of sin, we have been cast out of the garden into the wilderness, and called to cultivate the wilderness, but not without pain and suffering and hardship. Three weeks ago through the call of Abraham we saw how God is in the business of calling us out of the known, safe places we have built to cope with our wilderness problem, and towards the unknown with him, trusting his promises. Two weeks ago, we examined how God provided for Israel in their wilderness grumbling, showing how he teaches us to rely on him for our Sabbath rest. Finally last week we saw how the right response to the wilderness of the world is to cry out to God in lament and accept his discipline, learning to trust he is working to bring justice and righteousness to pass in his new covenant.

Today, you may feel like Adam and Eve. Tempted, and fallen—out of grace and into hardship. Everything is hard, almost *cursed*, and the realities of your own sin are weighing you down. You may feel like Abraham. Called out—into an unknown season, place, or situation you are unsure about—having left what is comfortable behind, but with a promised reward that feels really really far off and impossible. You may feel like Israel. God has been good in the past, but you are quite hungry, tired, discontent. There appears to be no rest on the horizon, and your past life of sin actually looks pretty good, especially as you see it lived out on social media by people who appear to be happy and confident and thriving. Or you may feel like Jeremiah. You've tried your best to hold the line, to remain faithful, but you feel so alone. All around you is pain and suffering and evil—who can you trust, you can you rely on, when the world feels so dark?

I'm here to tell you something indescribably sweet. You know those feelings of the wilderness, the ones felt by Adam, by Abraham, by Israel? Those feelings you feel now or will feel or have felt? Those feelings of hunger, pain, unknown, temptation, lament, barrenness, loneliness? Jesus felt them, too.

The fascinating thing about the scripture is that always, whether we see it or not, right beneath the surface, they are always pointing us back to Jesus. Today we find our way back to Jesus. He is the culmination of the wilderness, because as we see in **verse 1**, right after his baptism signifies the Spirit's seal on him to begin his ministry, he is led by the spirit into the wilderness.



Jesus walked into the wilderness for you, in order to do something about your wilderness problem. How do I know? Because **verse 1** says he was “led”. He didn’t happen to wander into a tough spot. Similarly, we learned that when we trust the spirit of God given to us, it will lead us through the Wilderness like Jesus, not around it. The way out of our dilemma is through. But What is Jesus doing going up to the wilderness for? He is perfect, he doesn't need escape.

First, Jesus went into the wilderness to be *tempted*. This may also be translated as “tested.” This means that Jesus went there in order to be our example. He knows that we are all tempted, and so his aim was to show us several different kinds of temptation and how to stand up under them. We face temptation *every day*: this is part of what it means to live in “the wilderness”. It’s a place of testing, where God is preparing us for heaven, sanctifying us. It is not that God is himself tempting us—James makes this clear—but rather that as a way to test and strengthen our faith and resolve, God allows us to be tempted, led away by our own desires. Today we will see how Jesus is our example of how to withstand the temptation of Satan in our wilderness.

Second, Jesus went there to *fast*—an intentional abstinence, to be made weak, to feel his lowliness, to identify with us in his physical need—look at **verse 2**, he was *hungry*. No doubt, after 40 days without food, you would be too. I also believe here that Jesus was operating in his humanity, meaning that there was nothing inherently supernatural about his fast. 40 days is around the tested limit of the human ability to go with just water and no food without severe, lasting physical effects or death. What Jesus is doing is going to the very end of his human strength, in order to show that he is our great empathizer. There is no weakness he has not experienced. None of us have ever been tempted by Satan himself after fasting for 40 days. We may have had times of great suffering, but Jesus took Satan’s best shot, at the point where he was physically weakest. Not only that, but he never gave in, showing how he has experienced temptation even further than we have, since at some point we always give in. Jesus is our great empathizer.

Thirdly, Jesus went to the wilderness to *fulfill his destiny*. Why did Jesus fast for 40 days in the wilderness? Not just because that was the limit of his physical body, but also because Israel wandered for 40 years in the desert. Matthew is not secretive: already he is telling us that Jesus is the true Israel. He has already given us plenty of hints: in his genealogy in chapter 1, which places Jesus in line with Abraham and David so that we already know Jesus is the savior of Israel, the messianic king to fulfill the covenants of Abraham and David. Then, Jesus goes down into Egypt and back out to escape Herod, which Matthew points to in **2:15** and says: it’s just like Israel! God is fulfilling that same promise when he says: “out of Egypt I called my son”. So then it makes sense when in **4:3** Satan comes and says to Jesus: “if you are really the Son of God”, prove it. Israel was called God’s Son, so here is Jesus fulfilling all the same things, doing what Israel could not do. Not only that, he is doing what Adam could not do: standing up to the snake! And he is doing what Abraham could not do: trusting God will fulfill his promises even when it seems impossible. So Jesus is showing here that he is our great *end*: he is the fulfillment of the wilderness, he is the king of the wilderness, he is the greater Israel, the greater Adam, the greater Abraham, the one who goes into the place of our need and does what no one else can do.



So those three purposes, remember them: Jesus shows in this text to be our example, our empathizer, and our end. Now, let's turn to the temptation itself, and we will get to the bottom of what really is Satan doing by phrasing each temptation in the form of a question, before seeing Jesus in each temptation as our example, our empathizer, and our end. Ready?

The Temptation of Desire: Is God Really All I Need?

Let's start in **verse 3**. What is so bad about feeding yourself? If Jesus is the Son of God, surely God doesn't wish his own son to go hungry? Surely he has the power to feed himself. He made a little boys lunch into the largest catering order in history, surely he could whip up a few loaves for himself before his fast gets so out of hand that it physically crushes him? Satan is tempting Jesus to become autonomous: to satisfy himself, rather than be satisfied in the Father.

Temptation is not always so obvious. It's not always flashing signs and lights, it's not always an invitation to adultery or embezzlement. It usually starts with simple dissatisfaction. This is why food is such a tangible example: it's something we have convinced ourselves we need, we can't live without. Which makes sense, because it's true biologically. But there are other things we are convinced we can't live without too: entertainment, sex, leisure time, investment accounts, college degrees, relationships, friends. We feel entitled to them. We make our desires everything.

This was Israel's temptation, which we saw first hand in our time in Exodus 16. They desired food more than freedom, they wanted full stomachs more than God. Israel's first sin was desiring their own felt needs more than desiring God himself. What do you think you need? What is that one thing that will really get you over the top, really make you satisfied? That felt need may be the very thing Satan is tempting you to go after in your own strength. He wants to convince you that God is not quite enough, you need Jesus plus something. And he is whispering: "you deserve your desires. If you are so smart, why don't you go get a better job? If you are so driven, why don't you go make more money? If you are such a good parent, why don't you work for more impressive kids? If you are such a good Christian, why don't you fulfill your own needs for once? Go on, turn those stones to bread. You know you can, why not?" Satan is masterful at turning our felt needs into idols.

But Jesus is our example. Look at his response in **verse 4**. See, Jesus fights this temptation with a scriptural truth. And that truth is simple: nothing satisfies but God. This is not to downplay bread, we do need it. It's not to downplay financial security, a good job, a comfortable life, a good degree, well-behaving kids. But you can live without any of that. Without God, you are a dead pile of bones. What you need is word.

Jesus is not saying that we should fast more in order to read the Bible. That will probably help a lot of us. What he is saying is that you have everything you need when you have God. Jesus is our example, he said: "is is my food to do the will of the Father who sent me." Where do you find the meeting of your needs? In the things God gives, or in the presence of God himself?

But we are not alone in this. Jesus lived a needy life. He had no place to lay his head, no sturdy bank account. He had friends who abandoned him, a mob that murdered him. No status before men, no



successful vocation to rely on. He was a vagabond, a traveler who relied on the hospitality of others, a friend of sinners in the company of rough and unsuspecting disciples and followers. He knows what it is like to be needy for the things of the world. And yet, he was never unsatisfied. He can be able to meet you when you feel as if your life is entirely disappointing and say: "I am still here. I'll never leave you. I know what it is like to have nothing but the plan of God. And here is why that is enough."

Finally, Jesus is our end. When we doubt God is really all we need, when the wilderness of Earth feels so barren that we have to live with a continual dull feeling of disappointment, he steps up. He says: "I am the true Israel, God's obedient son." Israel grumbled when their needs weren't met. They gave into temptation and tried to do things their way. But Jesus didn't. Like a lamb led to the slaughter he opened not his mouth. Jesus relied on the Father for everything he needed so that you can rely on him for everything you need. If you have faith in the perfect Son, you too are a child of God. And God does not let his children go hungry. Paul, in his time of need, promised the Philippians and us that: "God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." God has supplied your every need by sending the king of the wilderness into the wilderness of the cross, so that you can have the life of the resurrection.

The Temptation of Faith: Can I Really Trust God?

Now take a look at **verse 5-6**. Jesus is taken to the very top of the temple, and now Satan has scripture to use. He says: God promised he would protect you. If you know that to be true, let's test it out. Let the people see that God is really who he says he is. This is the second temptation. The enemy wants you to ask: can I really believe God?

Once again, the evil here is subtle. Satan is twisting God's word, implying that his promises of protection are abstract principles that must be proven rather than concrete realities that can be trusted. In other words, his temptation is to doubt that God is a God who is worth our faith. If we really need God to prove himself to us, then he is not God. For God to pander to our whims, to respond to our displays of doubt, is to submit himself to us, instead of us submitting to him. If God is really God, then he is God whether or not he proves himself in the way we like or not.

Ultimately, this is the sin of Adam and Eve. Satan asked "did God *really* say?" Why don't you eat the fruit and see what happens. The first temptation was to live by sight, not by faith, to believe that God's word was not enough. I was talking with some friends the other day who jokingly referenced how at every Mexican restaurant you go to, they bring out your plate and say: "careful, the plate is hot." And yet, what do 80% of us intentionally do? We touch the plate immediately! Why? Because we are doubting people: we want to know for ourselves what is true and what is not.

So what do we do when God speaks to us? When he warns us: "don't touch that. Flee from sin, run the other way"? We dip our toe in. We test out the water. Or what about when God says: "you are infinitely loved, more than you can ever imagine"? We shrug. What is all this? It's testing God: it's saying "prove it".



Jesus shows us the problem in his example of withstanding temptation in **verse 7**. He answers scripture with scripture, clearly stating that it is sinful to test God. In this he is our example. Although he had every ability to “force” God’s hand, Jesus lived by faith, not sight. What the devil has forgotten is that Jesus and the father are one: there is no distrust of the Father by the son, because they share one divine eternal will, bound up by love and faith in one another.

Still, Jesus empathizes with us. There we're plenty of times to mistrust God. I think of the example of John 10. Jesus has learned of his friend's death. He knows he can raise Lazarus, but he is incredibly empathetic. He visits Martha and Mary, and weeps with them. His weeping is telling us: “I feel what you feel. I understand what it is like to believe resurrection is coming, but not yet see it. It’s hard, it hurts.”

We live in a world of shadow, a wilderness that requires great faith. God promises to protect us, he promises to bring us to the end. And he also asks us to trust him. The first Adam could not trust God—he had to see for himself, and that meant the destruction of Eden. He stood in paradise and fell from grace, but the Second Adam stood in the wilderness and stayed upright. Jesus is the second Adam who proved that God is worth trusting. Again and again, Jesus trusted his Father to the point of death. Why? So that in him, your faith might become sight. Jesus Christ became flesh: incarnational. So that we could literally see a physical display of God’s trustworthiness. At the cross, God is saying: “I will go to any lengths to win you ” and in the empty tomb God is saying: “I told you so.” If we can believe Jesus Christ got up from the dead, we can believe God’s promises. God proved once and for all his undying love for sinners and his eternal victory over sin in Jesus. You can trust him, full stop.

The Temptation of Devotion: Will I Go God's Way, Or the Easy Way?

Finally we arrive at Jesus’ last temptation in **verse 8-10**. No longer is Satan subtle. In **verse 10**, is the first time he is actually called Satan, and the first time Jesus rebukes him. Satan means “adversary”. Here he is showing he really is God’s enemy. Before he was called “devil” which means “accuser”. The temptation given is in the form of an exchange: here are all the kingdoms of the world, and here is the price: fall down and worship me. This is a direct attack on the first commandment.

You may not feel that Satan is tempting you to bow down and worship him. But the temptation here in view is not just a desire for the occult. See, Satan knows Jesus is the Son. He has already acknowledged that. He knows that the kingdoms of the world are the inheritance of the Son. I do not think at this point he anticipates the cross, but he does know that God has a plan to give all things to the Son. And that plan involves some sort of redemption of fallen humanity and a fallen world. No doubt, Satan understands that redemption is never free. It’s costly. So here he double down on a last ditch effort. He offers Jesus an easy way out. “You don’t have to go through with the elaborate Trinitarian plan. You don’t have to come and save all these worthless sinners. You can



have it all *now*. Your coronation day can be *today*. All it takes is a simple bow of the knee.”

This was the temptation that Abraham fell into, wasn't it. God said: “All the nations of the earth will be blessed through you, and I will give you a son.” But Abraham got impatient. Sarah encouraged him, saying: “maybe God wants you to go ahead and take Hagar and have a son through her.” Why wait all this time, why endure all of this uncertainty, when we can just have God's blessing now? And Abraham gave in, he could not believe that the promised blessing of God was worth waiting for, was worth suffering for.

Jesus gives us the example of how to withstand this temptation in **verse 10**. Again, he quotes from God's law. The temptation to go our way, to not wait on God's timing, is linked to serving other God's. It's devoting, bowing down to, the way we want to go. Our own plans become our idols that we worship. Another example of this is Israel, as they waited for Moses to come down from the mountain with God's law. They became impatient, grumbling to Aaron and saying “what if Moses died up there?” So they resorted to idolatry, fashioning a golden calf. In the end, all of our shortcuts to God's blessings are like bending the knee to idolatrous gratification. When we say: “I can't wait any longer God” what we are really saying is “I'd like to try another kind of god. Maybe one who doesn't demand so much”

Do you ever wonder why seemingly moral, upright, or even Christian people can fall suddenly and violently into heinous sin? Why is it so common for Christian men, we may even say Christian leaders, to commit adultery, when nothing in their life seemed to point to that end before? It's because at some point, it got too hard to not give into sin. It just cost too much. Adultery is cheap—it's the easy way out. They got tired of going God's way. Committing in covenant love to one woman or one man for the rest of your life or theirs promises the blessings of companionship, partnership, and love, but oftentimes it takes a while! It's hard work. Monogamy is costly. But monotheism is costly too. To give our devotion only and firstly to God means that he comes before anything. It means that even if suffering comes our way, even if we flat out aren't able to have the things we *want*, we still worship. It means that though he may slay us, we will put our trust in him alone.

Jesus is our example. He never once flinches from his purpose. He said: “the son of man came to seek and save the lost”. He knows that while the devil offers him the kingdoms of the Earth, through his suffering Jesus is bringing a new kingdom to Earth that is much better than anything else Satan can offer him.

We are all devoted to something, and all worship and bow down and serve something. We are all tempted then, to submit ourselves to whatever is not God. Jesus understands is in this tempting of submission. He had many options to take the easy route. People mocked him at the cross, they said: “if you are the son of God, call down angels to save you!”. He knows what it is like to suffer patiently, in anguish that the plan of God is that salvation and blessing can never come without testing and suffering. In the garden, he sweated blood to empathize with you. He knows what it is like to be tempted to give in right before the finish line. But unlike Abraham, he didn't. For the joy



set before him, he endured. He took the cup of God's wrath and drank it down. He gave up everything, so that he may be a blessing to all the nations. But that blessing required great and costly sacrifice.

See, Satan offers you an exchange: have all you want in this life, if only you reject God and serve me. God offers a different exchange: serve me, and lay down your life in this life, and in the next you will have all my blessings. Friends, I want you to hear me clearly. God has promised great blessings for you on the other side of this wilderness life. He has promised a new Eden. He has promised a great nation, and a great family name. He has promised eternal rest. He has promised an end to all of your temptation and all of your testing and all of your lamentation and grief and tears. That end is coming—do not trade those blessings for Satan's empty promises of instant gratification. The blessings of God are worth suffering for, in fact they are worth dying for.

But get this: you are only called to die to yourself through the power of the one who died for you. Jesus died to purchase for you all the blessings of God. He made an exchange: not a kingdom for bowing to Satan, but an exchange of his life for yours. He counted the cost, offering up his own life in service to you so that you are able to withstand any temptation. If disobedience was the way into the wilderness, the way out is by the exchange of the perfect obedience of Jesus. He is the better Adam, Israel, and Abraham. The curse is reversed. The way out is not working to stand up perfectly to temptation, it's trusting the one who already has.

In this world you will have troubles, Jesus said. In this wilderness, you will face temptation. You will feel feelings of hunger, pain, unknown, temptation, lament, barrenness, loneliness. These are part of God's testing. But Jesus felt them, too. And he says: "take heart, I have overcome the world. I am king of the wilderness, and I am offering a way out." Jesus can be your example, Jesus can be your empathizer, but ultimately, Jesus is your end. At the end of the wilderness waits a king who did what we could not do: we went into the wilderness and passed the test we couldn't pass, so that in him we can come out the other side. Come to Jesus, the king of the wilderness—he is all you need, you can trust him, and his way is worth it.

