



**Mark 1:12-13**  
**What is Temptation?**

**Summary:** Jesus was tempted. What does that mean for the temptations we face today?

I have been looking forward to this morning, because I get to tell you something that made a *massive* difference in my life when I finally understood it. We're going to talk about temptation – what it is, what it isn't, and how we respond to it. So, if you're the kind of person that has ever felt temptation before – an impulse, urge, or offer to do something you know you should not do - you're going to want pay attention because we'll cover some things I'm hoping will be as helpful and life changing for you as they were to me.

But first, a little context. You remember we're here at [the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God \(1:1\)](#) – and for Mark it all starts with the ministry of John the Baptist. John was calling people to repent – to stop living for themselves and start living for God - to confess their sins and be baptized. And Jesus came out while all of this was happening – not to repent or confess, because He had never done anything wrong, but to say, "Yes, count Me in as Someone who is dedicated to living for God." We read:

**Mark 1:9** It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. **11** Then a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

We covered all of that last week, but now watch what happens next:

**12** Immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness. **13** And He was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to Him.

Now, you remember this is the teenage boy's gospel – full of action – the word [immediately](#) occurs 41 times! Well, [immediately](#) after His baptism, Jesus was [driven by the Spirit into the wilderness](#) where He was [tempted by Satan](#). If you read Matthew or Luke's gospels they tell you some of the specific temptations and how Jesus responded. But not Mark – he gives you two sentences, it's like an excited review of an action-adventure film: there was Jesus in the wilderness and the Holy Spirit and Satan and wild beasts and angels and Jesus won!

I plan on saying a little bit more than Mark this morning but only because there are some super important and helpful things we can notice here. First off:

**Jesus was tempted, but did not sin.**

Church, this is everything! And it is absolutely critical that you understand the difference. This is the thing that I discovered years ago that changed my life as a young man trying to live for God: *temptation is not sin.*

I didn't understand that at first.

I thought if I had some bad thought, or impulse, or if I remembered something bad from the past, it meant I was dirty. I was weak. I had failed. I had sinned. Here I was wanting to be good, wanting to be strong, wanting to be holy, wanting to be the kind of man God wanted me to be, and failing because I was tempted.

But then, one day, in His kindness, God helped me understand: *temptation is not sin!* Enticement is not evil. *Jesus* was tempted. For forty days. In the wilderness. By Satan. And He *did not* sin.

So, there has to be some space between these two things – they're not the same. Just because a thought, impulse, idea, or memory enters your mind it does NOT mean you have sinned. There's a knock at your door. You get up to see who's there. You open the door – recognize this isn't good – if you shut the door and keep on with your life, you have not sinned. It's only sin if open the door, see the temptation and say, "Well, come on in."

Have you ever gotten one of those totally suspicious texts from a number you don't recognize saying something like Hey, I'm so bored today, or I'm so lonely. That's temptation. You know you have *no business* responding to it. It's not sin *yet*, but it's going to lead you there, *soon*. It's not your fault that you're tempted, but it *will be* your fault if you sin. Friends, that distinction *is everything!*

Here's what you need to know: the Greek word we translate into English as temptation is also translated as try, so temptations are trials. They are meant to discover who you are – what you're like, what you're made of. Think of "tryouts" for dance or drama, or Olympic "trials" in athletics – they're meant to showcase and challenge your abilities – to discover what you can handle.

And that's what is happening with Jesus in the wilderness as He is tempted by Satan, but there's also something else symbolic going on. We said last week, He is re-enacting the drama of the Exodus. Well, after the people of Israel were delivered from captivity in Egypt God led them to the Promised Land.

When they got close, they sent out 12 spies to see what things looked like – they were gone forty days, and when they returned 10 of them were convinced there was no way this could happen. They said God had led them to something they could not do and they talked the rest of the people out of going any farther. Their faith and trust were tested, and they failed.

So, God had that faithless generation wander in the wilderness for forty years – one year for every day the spies had been gone and to give the people a chance to reconsider – did

they want to trust Him or not. After those forty years had passed, God led them to the Promised Land again and Moses reminded them of what they had been through and why:

**Deu 8:2** And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.

Well, now we find Jesus in the wilderness being tempted, or tested, by Satan for the same reason – to see what was in His heart and to see whether [He] would keep [the] commandments or not.

After forty *years* in the wilderness, Israel finally entered the Promised Land, trusting God to lead them and establish His kingdom. After forty *days* in the wilderness, Jesus returned and began calling people into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Perhaps you can see the connection now, but it prompts another question – did I just say that *God* tempts us? Well yes, and no. Yes in that the same word can mean either test or tempt. The distinction lies entirely in the motive of the one administering the trial.

Scripture is clear: God tests us, over and over again. But it's because He wants to see us grow. Like a loving father patiently teaching, coaxing, and encouraging their toddler to walk – He holds us up by the hands, helps us gain our balance and then encourages us to stumble toward Him. He knows we might fall – probably will fall, but He's not putting obstacles in our path or intentionally sticking His foot out to trip us. That's the kind of nasty thing Satan would do – to try to make us fall and see if we could still keep our balance. Do you see the radical difference in motives?

Do you see the difference between the person who says, 'alright, let's see what you've got!' and the person who says, 'let's see if I can make you to fail?' That's the difference between God testing you and Satan tempting you. Temptation is meant to be a trap.

When you read Matthew or Luke you see the kind of things that Satan tempted Jesus with – each time it was a temptation to see if he could get Jesus to do things His own way instead trusting the Father. He tempted Jesus, who was hungry, to turn rocks into bread and satisfy His hunger. He tempted Him to throw Himself down from a high place and see if God would protect Him. And he tempted Jesus to bow down to Satan and he would give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. It's possible that there were many more temptations, but these were the three big ones at the end – the last and strongest.

In every case, Jesus turned to Scripture and said, "**it is written.**" In other words, Jesus chose to trust the Father each and every time the devil tempted Him to try something else.

That is essential for you to understand – temptation is always a choice to do something other than what God wants or has commanded. Think back to the Garden of Eden – Adam and Eve knew exactly what was expected – don't eat from this tree. They sinned when they

choose to do what they felt was best, when they choose to trust themselves and their desires instead of God. *Simply experiencing* a desire, a thought, an impulse or a memory is only temptation, *choosing to follow it* is sin. That's an important distinction and now that we've nailed it down, let's move on to our second point this point this morning.

### **Jesus was led by the Spirit to face temptation in the wilderness**

It may seem shocking, but this encounter with Satan was not an accident or an ambush, it was God's will. Mark says the Spirit **drove** Jesus into the wilderness for this confrontation. It's the same word used of **driving** out a demon. It's a strong compulsion. You've probably felt something like this before, a deep sense that, this is something I should do, I might not want it, maybe didn't ask for it, but I think this is what God is doing and I just can't resist it.

Christian, don't miss this: God has the ability to drive us, to lead us, to direct our lives. And sometimes, that means, He'll drive us into the wilderness.

Now, the wilderness is not just a place, it's more like an idea. There was more than one 'wilderness' in Israel. The concept appears throughout Scripture. Sometimes it refers to mountains, other times to deserts or scrub lands, it was the kind of place that might be used as a pasture after rainfall, but was never farmed or developed – you traveled through the wilderness, but you didn't settle down in it.

Regardless of its geographic features, the wilderness was thought of as lonely and sometimes dangerous. Mark says Jesus was out there with the **wild beasts** – that would have been animals like jackals, wolves, foxes, boars, leopards, and hyenas. The wilderness was also the kind of place where you might be assaulted by bandits taking advantage of isolated travelers. It was like a bad horror movie – there's no one there to hear you scream.

Some see a contrast here – Adam and Eve were tempted and fell into sin in the Garden of Eden where everything was perfect, beautiful, harmonious – in other words they had everything going for them. Jesus *resisted* temptation in a place that was hostile and barren and He did it while fasting for forty days – in other words He had nothing going for Him.

And that is, absolutely, one way to see it. But there's another angle as well. Remember, **the Spirit drove** Jesus here – this was God's will, God's timing, God's way – so what if all this talk of battling temptation for forty days in the wilderness while fasting is not about fighting from a position of weakness, it's not about being ambushed by Satan when you're at your lowest, but rather, it's about fighting from a position of strength, being led by the Spirit to resist in a manner that *gives you the upper hand*? Maybe the wilderness is not entirely bad, it's actually a place God uses to help you grow – a training ground, a proving ground to develop and focus.

When you read the gospels, you learn that Jesus went out to the wilderness frequently. Down in verse 35 Mark tells us of the time Jesus got up in the morning, departed to a solitary place and prayed. Later, in Mark 6 (vs 31), Jesus takes His disciples out to a

deserted place to rest awhile. Matthew says He withdrew to a desolate place by Himself, crowds followed Him and He wound up feeding the 5000 because there was nothing else out there for them (Matt 14:13). Luke says

**Luke 5:16** He often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.

Why did Jesus head into the wilderness so often? Because the wilderness is a place of clarification, where distractions are reduced and you can focus even more clearly on God. Think about it – how often do you have this powerful moment of spiritual awareness on the Beltway, or on the Metro, or at the mall? But what about at the beach, or in the mountains, in the desert, or at night? There’s something about having less to look at, listen to, and think about that makes us more aware of God.

Now, there’s a tension here – because Scripture also has a LOT to say about the value of being with others in prayer and worship. There *are* times when Jesus got alone by Himself, but at critical moments, like the night before His death, He reached out to the disciples and asked them to be with Him, to pray for Him. So, it’s not all about being alone with God, but there are times for it. And when those times come, you need to know:

### **God is still sovereign in the wilderness**

Did you notice that while Jesus was in the wilderness, [the angels ministered to Him](#) – it’s the word *diakones* – where we get our word for deacon. They didn’t bring Him food – they weren’t there to save Him, but they ministered to Him spiritually providing assurance and encouragement.

When Israel was in the wilderness God provided water, manna, and quail to eat. After the forty years were over, Moses reminded them:

**Deu 2:7** “...the LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hand. He knows your trudging through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing.”’

Yes, the wilderness can feel empty, lonely, challenging, threatening even, but God can do whatever He wants, *even in the wilderness*. There is no place that He cannot reach you, help you, or send you strength. You need to know that, because:

### **We all pass through the wilderness at some point**

Those who read Scripture will find a rich theology of the wilderness from Genesis to Revelation. The wilderness comes in many forms – sometimes it’s an actual place out in the desert or off in the mountains, but other times it’s a feeling of isolation or barrenness that’s felt more socially or culturally, perhaps even financially – there are many ways for us to feel cut off, isolated, or alone.

Joseph was assaulted by his brothers in the wilderness, thrown into a pit and sold to foreigners who took him to Egypt. Later God appeared to Moses in a burning bush in the wilderness and called him to lead Israel out of captivity in Egypt. God then met with the nation in the wilderness at Mount Sinai and gave them the Ten Commandments and other instruction.

God allowed Daniel to be enslaved as a young man, taken across the wilderness to Babylon to experience social isolation from his people and then literal isolation in a pit with lions.

The prophets have a history thick with experience in the wilderness or lonely places. Jeremiah told God he actually wanted to escape to the wilderness instead of being with the people in Jerusalem (Jer 9:2) and was eventually thrown into solitary confinement for speaking God's message to a people who did not want to hear it. Jonah spent time wrestling with God out at sea and finally wound up inside the belly of a great fish. Elijah saw God do great things but then fled to the wilderness (1 Kings 19:4) where God provided for Him in miraculous ways.

King David spent time in the wilderness while fleeing from Saul (Ps 55:7), living in caves and surviving off the land. The apostle Paul had a radical encounter with Jesus in the wilderness and then spent seven years in obscurity in the desert before being called into ministry.

Over and over we find the pattern in Scripture – people spend time in the wilderness facing trials and temptations, but if all goes well, it's often followed by seasons of growth and service with God. This is a normal Christian experience and you should expect it to happen in your own life, multiple times in various ways.

God grabbed hold of me and changed my life radically in 1997 at Camp Pendleton in Southern California. The next year He brought me out Ft Meade, up between DC and Baltimore. I was one of two Marines going through an Army training program. The other guy was married and the Army didn't know what to do with me so I had a lot of time to myself outside of class with few friends. God used that time to clean me up from all the damage I had done to my own soul over the years, to strip me down, and build me back up. It was fourteen months of training in the wilderness and it reshaped my life.

I took another significant trip through the wilderness from June 2007 to May of 2008 when all my dreams and hard work to go back on Active Duty as a military chaplain fell apart and I found myself working construction part time in Central Virginia. Madeleine went through a terrible miscarriage, and then became pregnant with our second child, our dearly loved dog died, the money we had put in savings was running lower each month, and we battled through our questions and doubts about whether God had forgotten us or simply didn't care. It was dark and it hurt but we took turns encouraging each other – it seemed one of us would always have just enough faith to keep us both going.

Then one day God revealed what He was doing and called me up here to DC to pastor a church – something that was never on the radar – and here we all are today, fifteen years later, living out something I never could have imagined in the wilderness.

Friend, if it hasn't happened yet, your time in the wilderness is coming too. But as someone who has at least two major stamps in that passport, let me tell you what I've learned: God prepares us for the wilderness, and grows us in it. We are tested, tempted, tried, but it's all because God has better things for us, He wants to see us grow and He wants to help us do it.

Do you remember what happened right before the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness? Look back with me at:

**Mark 1:9** It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. **11** Then a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

**12** Immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness.

So what was echoing in Jesus' ears as He went to the wilderness? "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Well, Christian, *you* are God's beloved Son, or Daughter, in whom He is well pleased, even if He drives you into the wilderness. Don't forget that while you're out there.

So, here's what I hope you'll be thinking about today:

1. **There is a difference between temptation and sin.** You can't control who knocks on your door, you're only responsible for who and what you let in. *How does that change your outlook and self-assessment of how you're doing spiritually?* Because,
2. **You can pass the test of temptation.** You can resist. You have the Word of God to guide you, the Spirit of God to strengthen you, and the church of God to encourage you. So,
3. **How can time in the wilderness help you fight temptation and trials?** Remember Jesus made regular trips to be alone in the wild. That might look different in your life than it did in His, but when, where and how can you get alone with God to strengthen your soul? For some of you, maybe it's time to schedule time away away, in the literal wilderness, with God, to gain the perspective you need for the challenges and questions you face. Whatever your situation, you need to know:
4. **Jesus, the reigning champion, is helping you.** Whatever your wilderness, whatever your temptation. God offers forgiveness when you fail, strength when you're weak, and guidance for every part of life. He knows what's happening in your wilderness. He knows your temptation. He's been there before Himself. If you feel like you can't make it – you're right – but He can. He has. And, He offers to help you.

Maybe you remember that passage from

**Hebrews 4:15**... we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are, yet* without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Let's pray.



## Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

### Mark 1:12-13 What is Temptation?

**Summary:** Jesus was tempted. What does that mean for the temptations we face today?

- Has God ever led you into the wilderness? What happened, what were the trials and temptations? What did you learn?
- Explain the difference between temptation and sin in your words. Why is this distinction so important? How does it affect the way you see your own spiritual life?
- How could the same situation be used by God to test you and Satan to tempt you?
- Read Matthew 4:1-11 to discover how Satan tempted Jesus and how He responded.
  - o What are some successful strategies you have learned to resist temptation?
- Read Luke 4:13 - what do you learn about the ongoing nature of temptations and trials?
- According to Scripture, Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness because they didn't believe God:

Nu 14:34 According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years, and you shall know My rejection.

  - o How do you react to God establishing consequences for failing to follow and trust Him?
  - o Remember, God did provide for their every need during those forty years – how does this reflect both the justice and mercy of God?
- What do we learn about temptation from the following verses?
  - o 1 Corinthians 10:13
  - o 1 John 2:1