

Jesus in the Wilderness

Purpose

To claim the power of Scripture to combat temptation in our lives

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Matthew 4:1-11 (NIV)

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.

6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.

9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Matthew 4:1-11 (KJV)

1 Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.

2 And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred.

3 And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.

4 But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.

5 Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple,

6 And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.

7 Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

8 Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them;

9 And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.

10 Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

11 Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

March 16	Proverbs 1:10-17
March 17	Matthew 12:43-45
March 18	James 1:2-4, 13-15
March 19	Deuteronomy 8:1-10
March 20	Deuteronomy 6:10-19
March 21	Hebrews 4:11-16
March 22	Matthew 4:1-11

Seeing the Need

Temptation. The word always involves the enticement to do something we would otherwise not do, and usually that something is sin. “I’m tempted to try that new dessert.” “I’m tempted to do this or do that,” usually based on the lure of something that exists out there somewhere. I think we can be honest that temptation rarely, if ever, is some force that calls us into holiness or right ways of living. More likely, it’s the “come on” to do what we should not do.

Isn’t it interesting that, immediately after his baptism and the spoken blessing from God calling Jesus God’s Son (Matthew 3:13-17), Jesus was led by the Spirit into an extended time of temptation? It was a time to test Jesus’ own spirit and confidence in God’s power in his life to overcome the need or lure to live like anyone else in the world.

The great news of this Scripture is that Jesus did overcome this temptation. He did what we wish and hope we could do. As we look closely at this incident from Jesus’ life, we can learn how Jesus said no to temptation, and we can find in his example resources to help us grow more fully into Christlikeness.

The Fact of Temptation

Maybe it’s something fairly innocent, such as wanting another piece of chocolate, or not counting that one missed stroke on the golf course. It could be a bit more serious, such as breaking a traffic law or shoplifting. Or even more, giving one’s self over to pornography or to acts of violence or vandalism. As we noted in earlier lessons, the lure of temptation is woven into our behavior as humans. We want what we cannot or should not have; and in our self-centered nature, we think we should receive preferential treatment or be allowed to do what no one should do.

It’s important to realize that temptation is not a rational thing. It is always an emotional takeover of our reason and our core beliefs. When we are tempted to do something, whatever it is seems to rise in power and overwhelm normal decisions we would otherwise make.

My beloved wife, Cheri, is one of the more balanced and reasonable people I’ve ever known, except when it comes to shoes. I have three pairs of shoes that I wear, including a pair of sandals for the summer. I just sneaked into our closet and counted over 25 pairs of shoes Cheri owns, not including the pair she is wearing today. This count also does not include the near dozen pairs she is giving away to help others dress more fashionably. Frankly, she has never met a

pair of shoes she didn't like, and she usually buys them!

Cheri is helpless in the face of footwear. Not me, of course. I'm happy with my eight-year-old dress shoes. But let's not talk about our collection of antique stoneware crocks, okay? I mean, there is always room for another piece for the house, right?

Our temptations are as varied as our personalities, and we need to understand that temptation never goes away. There are and will always be invitations to do what no thinking person would reasonably do but what seems, at the time, to be a good path to take. Once we are clear about the reality of temptation in our lives, then we can understand its power over us. We can also recognize our need for God to overcome those enticing, sometimes innocent, sometimes horrible ways in which we are tempted to take a path that is not good for us.

Two other things about temptation: First, being tempted usually happens when we find ourselves in dangerous places. That is, we are most easily tempted when we are outside of our normal element.

When I'm in a strange place, even if that's a shoe store, an antiques mall, or a foreign place I don't know well, my anti-tempting guard goes down. In the midst of a strange place, I see things that I might not see in my normal life, and those things are tempting and enticing. The strong barricades against moving forward on them slide away.

Now that's not to say that we should never leave home or travel or go to new places, but it's critical for us to always know where we are and what we are facing. That helps us make decisions that

are less emotional and reactive and more thoughtful, with a level of reserve. If I go to an antiques store with money in my pocket and get carried away, I can assure you I will not only be led into temptation but will embrace it fully and completely, with my cash and credit card!

Second, temptation causes heart-break when I give in to it. The thing that is tempting me can even try to overwhelm me and take away my reasonable perspective and thoughts. But it is only when I say yes that the temptation and the tempter win. No one makes us fall into and agree with temptation. It's on us. It is our sin, our fault, our lack of backbone, or our willingness to please ourselves no matter the cost that makes it so horribly effective.

What was happening in your life that made the temptation so easy to agree to?

Knowledge Is Power

When I was about eight or nine years old, the Air Force base chapel my family attended had a junior youth group for children in grades three through five. We had lots of fun with great songs, lessons, and games. One of the more important parts, however, was the ongoing Bible verse memorization. We were challenged to memorize what seemed to be a massive list of Scripture verses.

As we recited the verses we had learned each week, the leaders would check off squares on their large tally board. As we passed certain levels, we would receive precious and valuable gifts, such as rulers with Bible verses on them or Bibles with the winners' names inscribed on them. These were powerful incentives to learn Bible verses, and they were effective.

Would it surprise you to know that I still have all of those prizes in my possession today? More important, I still can quote a huge number of verses in the Bible that are woven and cemented into my brain. I didn't realize at the time as an eight-year-old what enormous gifts those leaders had given me: the ability to rely on Scripture when things got rough in my life and to use Scripture in sharing the good news with others.

Matthew wrote the verse so plainly, so matter-of-factly: "Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him" (Matthew 4:1). But Jesus was no victim here. As it was at his baptism, his temptation was "part of his obedience to God."¹

Matthew also tells us that Jesus went for 40 days without eating and "was starving" (verse 2). But while Jesus was physically hungry—he was human, after all—his 40-day fast had strengthened him spiritually for what would come next. That's when the devil first brought the temptation to bear. He painted a picture of what could be if only Jesus were to succumb to the temptation to act in a way that would betray his true identity as the Son of God.

The devil was pretty crafty in inviting Jesus to take advantage of the privilege of being God's Son, to care for himself, to make God care for him, and to lord over the world: "Command these stones to become bread . . . throw yourself down . . . bow down and worship me" (verses 3, 6, 9).

How could Jesus resist such temptation? It was so powerful, and Jesus was in a weakened state. In those moments of terrible temptation, Jesus recalled his training as a boy in the synagogue. He remembered Scripture verses that must

have been woven into his mind and heart. When the devil made a full-on press to get Jesus to fall in the temptation, Scripture took over. Jesus didn't have to bring a long-winded theological treatise. He quoted Scripture, and the truths of Scripture empowered him to withstand what the devil offered and keep Jesus on the holy path.

One of my favorite hymns of all time is one I expect you know as well: "How Firm a Foundation." The first stanza says, "How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent word!"² Within the United Methodist tradition are four factors guiding our understanding of God: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The primary resource and standard for doctrine is Scripture, God's excellent Word.

A great tragedy in a Christian's life occurs when that person has no knowledge of God through Scripture. Of course, we can understand the grace of God and the gift of Christ in many ways, but a powerful core source comes as we study the Bible, as we learn the verses, and as we weave those verses into our very lives. For many people, all I have to do is write, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," and you can complete the sentence and probably many others that follow it. You know the power of those words to comfort, to guide, to reconfirm God's loving care. Just as Jesus relied on his learning, so we have the responsibility and opportunity to do the same.

What verses of Scripture do you most cherish? How much time do you spend in reading and studying Scripture on a regular basis?

To Say the Right Thing

Can you think of a time when, after the heat of an intense conversation, you came up with absolutely the best retort or response, but it was too late? I certainly can. For some reason, it seems our brains often freeze up when we are in an argument, and we miss the chance to provide a strong comeback. I like to think of it as God guarding our mouths, saying, “That’s enough; time to cool off.” Still, we probably do wish we had thought of those things to say earlier.

Jesus was in a face-to-face battle with the devil. He was exhausted and starving, having spent 40 days alone and now being in a weakened state. The devil came on strong, affirming Jesus’ identity as God’s Son but challenging him about what that actually meant to him. Since you’re hungry, he said, “command these stones to become bread” (verse 3). Would Jesus decide to perform a miracle to assuage his own hunger and that of others (notice the plural “stones”), or would he rely on God to provide for him? Jesus’ reply was simple and direct, and he quoted Scripture: “It’s written, People won’t live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God” (verse 4; Deuteronomy 8:3).

Having been foiled in that first test, the devil then took Jesus “into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple,” challenging him to “throw [himself] down.” After all, the devil said, also quoting Scripture, “it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won’t hit your foot on a stone” (verse 6). Again, Jesus’ reply was simple and direct: “Don’t test the Lord your God” (verse 7; Deuteronomy 6:16).

The devil was still not done with Jesus, taking him next “to a very high mountain” where he “showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (verse 8). All of this can be yours, the devil told Jesus, “if you bow down and worship me” (verse 9). Why not trust that God will protect you, even if you do something as careless as jumping off the top of the Temple? the devil said. How about just bowing down to me, and I will give you all of the kingdoms of the world? Think of the power you would have! Strong temptations, to be sure, and ones we might cave into and accept. But the kingdoms the devil offered to Jesus were not his to give.

A third time, Jesus rebuffed the devil by quoting Scripture, this time adding his own words as well: “Go away, Satan, because it’s written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him” (verse 10; Deuteronomy 6:13). Finally, the devil left Jesus, “and angels came and took care of him” (verse 11).

Not only did Jesus know Scripture so well he could quote it, he knew exactly what the devil was tempting him to do, and Jesus responded with exactly the right words at the right time. When faced with the test and the enticement to sin, encouraged to place himself and his needs above God’s will and power, Jesus instead used the power of Scripture and the blessing and knowledge of God to overcome the temptation handed to him by the devil.

You see, Jesus knew at that moment what overcomes temptation. His love for God, his humble respect for God’s call and claim on him, his knowledge of Scripture that contains the story of God’s interaction and grace for this world from the beginning of time—all of these

empowered Jesus to withstand temptation. Jesus had one thing more: He had faith in God's power and provision.

Notice the three Scripture verses Jesus quoted. They all deal with our relationship with God and how we are to live and trust our lives to God in all things. That's what defeated the devil. That's also what will defeat the temptations in our lives, no matter how delicious or enticing or reasonable they seem to be.

Anything that does not draw us closer to God is a temptation to lead us farther away from God. We have been given the power to overcome it, by God's grace and loving hand. It is our call to live as Jesus lived, in love, respect, knowledge, and trust in the one who has created us and who sent his Son to free us from the

burden of being powerless in temptation.

Trusting in God empowers us to live in our world as holy, loving, and hopeful children. To try to go it alone will bring only the certainty of broken hearts and broken lives for ourselves and others.

What helpful words from Scripture might you share with someone you know who is in the midst of a time of temptation, in their wilderness, who needs to find a better path with God?

God of our firm foundation, allow me this day to find my solid ground in you. Give me the desire to know your Word more completely and to call on its truths when temptation comes; in Jesus' name. Amen.

- 1 From The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume VIII (Abingdon Press); page 163.
- 2 The United Methodist Hymnal, 529.