

Single-Minded Obedience

Bible Background • MATTHEW 4:1–11

Printed Text • MATTHEW 4:1–11 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 91

Aim for Change

By the end the lesson, we will: EXPLORE the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, ASPIRE to obey God as Jesus demonstrated, and DEVELOP spiritual habits that can strengthen them in times of temptation.

In Focus

As Valerie boarded the train, she felt optimistic about the next phase in her life. She had always loved living in the big city, and after college, she couldn't wait to return to the same neighborhood where she was born and raised. Her life's passion was helping troubled teens in her community turn their lives around, and six years ago, God blessed her with the opportunity to work in full-time ministry with them.

Valerie thought she was set for life. But then the ministry lost its building and most of its funding, and it had to let go most of its employees, including Valerie. Just when she thought things couldn't get any worse, her health began to fail. The mounting hospital bills plunged her into so much debt she could no longer pay her mortgage. She lost her home. So now, Valerie was on a train headed to her uncle's place in a small town.

"How could you be so happy about losing everything and having to leave here?" her friend asked the day before.

"I ain't gonna lie. I had to remember all the rough spots God got me through. I believe He will get me through this one."

Valerie knew that her only hope was in God. Just as He had taken care of her before, He would again.

How has God taken care of you in a time of crisis?

Keep in Mind

"Get out of here, Satan," Jesus told him. "For the Scriptures say, 'You must worship the LORD your God and serve only him'" (Matthew 4:10, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Tempted (v. 1) peirazo (Gk.) — To test or entice to sin

B. Ministered (v. 11) diakonein (Gk.) — To serve

Say It Correctly

Beelzebub. bee-EL-zeh-bub.

Massah. mass-SAH.

KJV

Matthew 4:1 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.

NLT

Matthew 4:1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil.² For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.

3 During that time the devil came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread."

4 But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple,

6 and said, "If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He will order his angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone.'"

7 Jesus responded, "The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the LORD your God.'"

8 Next the devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.

9 "I will give it all to you," he said, "if you will kneel down and worship me."

10 "Get out of here, Satan," Jesus told him. "For the Scriptures say, 'You must worship the LORD your God and serve only him.'"

11 Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus.

The People, Places, and Times

Satan. In Hebrew, the name means "adversary" or "accuser." God's people's understanding of evil developed over the course of time, but by Jesus' day, the Jewish understanding of Satan was an embodied force of evil, a fallen angel who had rebelled against God before Creation. He is the chief of the demons and is called many names and titles: the devil, Beelzebub, the prince of the power of the air. He is very mighty and tries to tempt or harm God's children, but in the end, he will be captured and defeated by God and his angelic hosts.

Background

The Gospel of Matthew makes numerous references to Old Testament Scriptures that foretell the coming of the Messiah. The Jews were anticipating the arrival of the Messiah in the midst of Roman occupation. Matthew writes to provide evidence to Jews that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, the Messiah. In Matthew 3, John the Baptist, as the forerunner for Christ, called for the Children of Israel to repent. In doing that, he fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 40:3). Jesus makes His public appearance and asks John to baptize Him in the Jordan River. John does, and at that moment the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove to bear witness to this truth and God makes an audible public statement identifying Jesus as His beloved Son. (Matthew 3:13–17).

What Scriptural evidence can you cite to prove that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?

At-A-Glance

1. Passing the Flesh Test (Matthew 4:1–4)
2. Passing the Power Test (vv. 5–7)
3. Passing the Pride Test (vv. 8–11)

In Depth

1. Passing the Flesh Test (Matthew 4:1–4) Shortly following God's pronouncement of Jesus as His beloved Son in whom He is well pleased (Matthew 3:17), Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit to the wilderness where He fasts for forty days. The Scriptures do not give details on why Jesus was led to the wilderness, but wilderness throughout the Old Testament is indicative of a place of solitude, consecration, and revelation. After fasting and no doubt praying during the forty days of solitude, Jesus is met by the devil (the Tempter) who brings Jesus His first test. Satan hearkens back to the visible blessing of God during Jesus' baptism. The Tempter says that if Jesus is who God says He is (the Son of God), then Jesus should prove it by using His power to provide food for Himself. Jesus stands firm in His identity, trusting God for His provision and not seeking to satisfy His hunger. Jesus does not depart from the commandment of God; He treasures the words of God more than His necessary food. Therefore, Jesus replied to Satan's suggestion by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. He selects this passage because God used the wilderness to test and prove the Children of Israel and to humble them (Deuteronomy 8:2) so that they would know that they were to remain completely dependent on Him. Jesus cites this verse to make a statement to the devil that although He is the Son of God and came from God, He remains completely yielded to His Father. Jesus' answer reminds us that food is not what really sustains life. The Word of God is.

What can we learn from Jesus about remaining resolute in our dependence on God's provision?

2. Passing the Power Test (Matthew 4:5–7) The devil is not done with his discourse and sought yet another opportunity to question Jesus' identity and move Jesus from His faithfulness to God. The devil leads Jesus to the height of the Temple in the holy city of Jerusalem. He then asks Jesus to prove who He is by a display of power—throwing Himself off the building. The devil even cites Psalm 91:11–12 in his attempt to back up his challenge. He wants Jesus to frivolously use His divine power, but Jesus does not take the bait. Instead, Jesus responds by referencing Deuteronomy 6:16 where the Lord God commands Israel not to put Him to useless, vain tests to prove His care for them. Rather than flaunting His power by calling on angels to rescue Him to prove a point to the devil, Jesus relies again on the knowledge of who He is. He remains faithful to His Father.

Why is it important for God's people to be secure in their identity in Christ?

3. Passing the Pride Test (Matthew 4:8–11) In what will be his last attempt for this encounter with Jesus, the devil leads Jesus to the top of a mountain and suggests that if Jesus bows down and worships him, he will give Him the world and all its glory. This is the devil's most audacious offer. He attempts to give Jesus what already belongs to Him (Daniel 7:13–14, Matthew 28:18). At this point, Jesus has had enough of Satan and tells him to

get behind Him, be gone, get out! Jesus then quotes Scripture to let the devil know that as the Son of God He will worship God alone and remains subject to His Father (Exodus 34:14). After this last attempt, the devil leaves, and Jesus is refreshed, replenished, and served by the angels. When believers withstand tests, it is imperative to get rest in the presence of God to be restored and renewed.

How can we use Jesus' example to withstand the devil's schemes?

Search the Scriptures

1. Jesus met every temptation from the devil by remaining true to His purpose. What Scriptures did He use in His responses? (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10)
2. What Scripture did the devil misuse in his attempt to persuade Jesus? (Matthew 4:6, Psalm 91:11–12)

Discuss the Meaning

1. What can we learn from Jesus about how to meet everyday challenges to our character and identity?
2. How can we ensure that we remain focused on God's eternal purpose for our lives and not get caught up in selfish pursuits?
3. What did Jesus do in the wilderness that enabled Him to withstand temptation?

Liberating Lesson

In today's context, Christians are met with many opportunities to compromise their standards in order to achieve some goal. However, our belief system must remain rooted and grounded in what the Scriptures teach for right living and moral and ethical behavior in spite of cultural shifts. As God's standard bearers, like Jesus, we must also remain humble and let our light shine so that the world will see how we live as a testimony to the power of the God we serve and turn to Him. We must stand up for what is right at every level, no matter who agrees or disagrees. We must hold every system accountable to God's standards for making decisions for the common good.

Application for Activation

Hebrews 4:14 says that Jesus is our High Priest, He is able to sympathize with struggles of our human condition because He was tempted as we were but did not sin. Jesus was able to withstand. How did Jesus do it? He knew His identity, stuck to His purpose, and remained submitted to the will of the Father. Examine your life for areas in need of strengthening to withstand in these times knowing that you have an Advocate in Jesus who lives to make intercession for you.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 4:1–11 Jesus' dialogue with John the Baptist (Matthew 3) and with the devil (Matthew 4:1–11) provides a foundation for His ministry throughout the remainder of the Gospel. Interpreters have understood the temptations outlined here in a variety of ways. Some scholars place emphasis on Jesus being tempted in a fully human manner with the temptations that typically befall the Christian. In that light, Matthew 4:1–6 attempts to show how Jesus withstood the human temptations of gluttony, glory, and greed as an example to His followers. A variant of this interpretation is psychological. Consequently, the temptation of Jesus shows how faithful persons can overcome the temptations of materialism, self-centered actions, and power over the world. Other scholars argue that Jesus' temptations are the distinctive temptations of the Savior, who is preparing to undertake His necessary role in salvation history. In this case, a particular focus is placed on His obedience throughout the ordeal. Those scholars see this as the decisive struggle between Jesus and Satan. These struggles represent the three basic dimensions of messiahship: 1. the prophetic (the Word of God); 2. priestly (the Temple); and 3. royal (the kingdoms of the world). A third group of scholars identifies an apologetic (a way to defend the Gospel) role for the temptation story. In this view, the account challenges false understandings of the Messiah in the Jewish world at the time. It is also possible that the temptation story serves to address an internal church dispute regarding Jesus. In some cases, this reflects the insistence by early Christians that Jesus was the Messiah, despite the fact that He did not fit the prescribed categories—most notably that the Messiah would not be killed. None of these, however, appears capable of explaining fully what unfolds here.

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

The role of the Spirit in leading Jesus to the wilderness should be taken as a model for the whole ministry of Jesus to come. Mountainous wilderness can be found immediately outside the Jordan valley. The word “wilderness” (Gk. *eremon*, EY-ray-mon) looks back to Matthew 3:1 and 3 as well as forward to other elements that form a typology based on the Old Testament testing of Israel in the wilderness. The agency of the devil in this verse is important to understanding what it means for Jesus to be tempted. Judaism in Jesus' day struggled with the idea of the source of sin, wondering if God sent temptation or simply allowed it. Even though Jesus is being led by the Spirit, the temptation comes from the devil. James is clear in his teaching that God does not tempt people (James 1:13–14). However, the sense that God was involved was never lost in Jewish thought. This can be seen in this verse through the action of the Spirit in leading Jesus into the wilderness.

Because of the role of the Spirit and the role of the devil, the message appears to be that Satan tempts and, thereby, God tests (see also Job 1–2). Consequently, the actions of the devil aside, the same word “tempted” (Gk. *peirazo*, pay-RAD-zo) that is used to refer to God's testing of Israel in the wilderness is echoed here (Exodus 16:4, 20:20). The actions of the devil are not the central focus of this story. The focus is rather on the temptations themselves and the nature of their rebuff. Later in this Gospel, the devil will be identified as the one who sows the weeds (Matthew 13:39) and the one for whom the eternal fire has been prepared (Matthew 25:41). He is called “the tempter” (Matthew 4:3) and “Satan” (Matthew 4:10) when he is sent away by Jesus. This will be echoed later, when Peter is identified with Satan (Matthew 16:23). His role as prince of the demons comes up when he is called “Beelzebub” (Matthew 12:27).

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

Matthew identifies Jesus' failure to eat with the religious practice of fasting (cf. Luke 4:2). The Bible offers no particular theory of fasting, but it takes place in a variety of contexts. It is fundamentally a practice of mourning, generally with repentance.

In Israel, it was a practice of ritualized mourning in the face of disaster (see Isaiah 58:3–6; Jeremiah 14:12; Joel 1:14). Fasting is also associated with seeking God's guidance, petitioning for God's assistance in a matter of immediate concern, and with an intense focus on God. Because of its public character, fasting is discussed critically in Matthew 6:16–18. The most likely reason for Jesus' fasting is consecrating Himself as He enters His earthly ministry. Thus, fasting brings the issues facing Jesus into sharp focus. The resulting hunger has a

clear parallel in the testing of Israel in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:2–3), while “forty days and forty nights” echoes the forty years the Israelites spent in the wilderness. Such an association with the time of Moses makes it clear that Jesus’ fasting is extraordinary.

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

Having been presented in Matthew 4:1, the devil is now introduced into the story as “the tempter.” Jesus’ hunger becomes the occasion for the first temptation. The devil’s use of “if” is not an expression of doubt on his part, nor is it an attempt to suggest that Jesus should doubt. Rather, it is on the basis of Jesus’ status as the Son of God that He is being encouraged to act. Jesus knows that He is the Son of God and thus has a special status. The devil, then, suggests that this status is something to be exploited—that Jesus should use His opportunities as the Son of God to see to his own needs (i.e., satisfying His hunger). We can imagine that the stones involved are of the size and general shape that loaves of bread would have been. The bread would satisfy Jesus’ hunger and allow the devil to declare a victory over God.

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.

Jesus responds to the devil with words from Deuteronomy 8:3, which take us once again to the wilderness testing of Israel. When the Israelites were hungry in the wilderness and longed for the bread of Egypt (Exodus 16:3), God provided “manna” to nourish them (Deuteronomy 8:3). Specifically, Deuteronomy 8:2–5 was concerned with the way God led the people of Israel during the forty years in the wilderness by testing to see whether they would keep His commandments, in order to train them like children. This passage makes it clear that our attention should not be focused on bread or any desire for fulfilling our natural needs or yearnings, especially if that means moving our attention from God’s promises and truths in order to seek satisfaction for ourselves. We are to seek God’s kingdom above all else (Matthew 6:33).

Thus, the desire for bread does not influence Jesus to erroneously use His power and authority. Satan implies that turning stones into bread in the midst of hunger would be a sign of Jesus’ privileged position as the Son of God, but Jesus’ answer operates in more general terms and focuses the issue on how followers should live before God. While Jesus is unique as the Son of God, the nature of the temptation to rely on ourselves instead of God is no different from what faces all human beings. Here the noun *rhema* (RAY-mah) is used in a narrow fashion as “word,” but elsewhere in Matthew it is sometimes used in the general sense of “thing” or “matter.” Given this narrow usage, what is likely meant here is that listening to God is life-sustaining.

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

The wilderness location is abandoned in the second and third temptations, although this story still echoes the wilderness experience of Israel. The devil “taketh” Jesus here, as he will do again for the third temptation (Matthew 4:8). The word involved, *parelaben* (Gk. pah- RAY-lah-ben), was also used for Joseph’s taking Jesus (and his mother) to Egypt, as well as for the return journey (2:14, 21). It is likely that Matthew takes up the word here to establish a contrast between Joseph and the devil: Joseph acts to protect the child Jesus, while the devil seeks to entice the adult Jesus to His doom. The status of Jerusalem is highlighted in the use of “the holy city” to describe it. The Temple location within the city takes this even further since it is the official dwelling place of the presence of God, pointing to the reality of God’s help (cf. 1 Kings 8:22–53). It is not entirely clear what is meant by the translation “pinnacle” (Gk. *pterugion*, puh-teh-ROO-gee-on, literally “wing”), since the Temple is not described as having tall spires. Its role here, though, is just to provide a high-enough point from which Jesus can be encouraged to jump.

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.

The first temptation rested on the immediacy of Jesus' hunger. This second temptation operates in a larger framework. The devil points to the promise in Psalm 91:11–12 of protection for the godly. However, Jesus is being asked to create the situation of need first. Jesus is called upon to force the hand of divine protection by provoking a life-threatening situation. Jesus is to demand that God, on the basis of His status as the Son of God, rescue Him from a threat upon His life. According to the devil's theory, Jesus can test God by throwing Himself off the pinnacle since His life will be preserved through angelic help. But this test hearkens forward to another significant scene where Jesus will refuse to obey the scribes who taunt Him as the Son of God, tell him to come down from the Cross and save Himself (Matthew 27:40). Thus, what is happening here in the second temptation points forward to the obedience of the Son of God not only throughout His life and ministry on earth but especially during His Passion, the suffering He experienced before dying on the Cross.

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

Jesus resists Satan's twisted logic. In response, He quotes Deuteronomy 6:16, where Israel is challenged to do better than they had at Massah. There they had confronted Moses about the preservation of their lives (Exodus 17:3; cf. 17:7). But it is not the people's place to dictate to God how God is to express His covenant commitment to them. Doubt, demand, and dissatisfaction appear to be the core components of the wilderness test of God (Exodus 17:2, 7; Numbers 14:22; Deuteronomy 6:16). In those verses we understand that instead of grumbling, the Israelites were admonished to accept God's pledge that He will do well by the people. Again, despite the particularity of the temptation in the specific case of Jesus, its fundamental form is not different from any temptation that faces other human beings.

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.

The word "again" now introduces the third time that the devil takes Jesus to a new place. The devil promises to give Jesus not just the holy land, but "all the kingdoms of the world." Satan phrases this so that it appears that the devil has ownership of all that can be seen from the mountain and all the kingdoms of the world. In other words, it is the devil's gift so that the promise to give it comes from the devil, not God. The mountain location clearly underscores the importance of the event, as it does when mountains appear elsewhere in the Gospel. There is a steady rise in altitude, from the wilderness to the Temple pinnacle to a mountaintop, a climactic start to the third temptation. The two previous temptations were perversions of Jesus' calling as the Son of God. In this final temptation, the stakes are much higher. If He complies, Jesus would be abandoning His calling as the Son of God and transferring His allegiance to the devil. (Notice that the "if thou be the Son of God" drops out.) If Jesus were to take as His goal the possession of "all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them," then He would pursue this by following the ways of the world, desiring glory for Himself in this world, and becoming indebted to Satan. Indeed, this final temptation brings into the open what is to be understood as the goal of the prior two trials.

Jesus views the devil's offer in the light of the warning that He will later give others: "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Matthew 16:26) But "the whole world" is not an offer to other human beings as it is to Jesus here. In fact, the scale of the offer only highlights the unique status of Jesus as the Son of God. The glory of all the kingdoms of the world, as offered to Jesus, is to be contrasted with the heavenly glory of God's kingdom (see Matthew 16:27). After His ministry, death, and resurrection, God gives Jesus the positive counterpart to the Satanic counterfeit offered here in Matthew 4:8–9. The devil erroneously believes he has given Jesus a choice between following the devil's imagined authority and committing to the true authority of God as given to His only begotten son.

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.

In this last account of Jesus' response—its climax—the devil is now called “Satan,” the Greek form for the Hebrew word for “adversary.” In line with the sense of climax for this third temptation, we find Jesus' decisive repudiation: “Get thee hence, Satan.” Jesus follows His rebuff of Satan with another quotation from Deuteronomy 6:13. We should note that Jesus' response focuses on what is to be the proper demeanor before God, and once more He alludes to Israel in the wilderness setting. Even if giving Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth and their glory was within Satan's power, Jesus knows the ends would not have justified the means had He worshiped Satan to gain the world. No prize is worth breaking faith so severely with God who alone is worthy of worship.

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

Jesus has withstood every attempt of the devil to deflect Him from His calling as the Son of God. He has stood the test, and the devil has been rebuffed. Satan can do nothing other than withdraw. It is the nature of temptation to press at certain times. Jesus here faced, in a fundamental way, issues designed to tempt Him to take a life path different from that set for Him by His Father. Having withstood the temptations, angels come to Jesus' aid. The word “ministered” (Gk. diakonein, dee-ah-KOnayn) can mean “serve” in a broad sense, but in the context of this passage, the imagery of being served at a table makes a reference to providing food. Jesus, who refused to turn stones into bread, receives food from heaven. The message is, God is no one's debtor.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Don't Test the Lord
(Deuteronomy 6:16–25)

TUESDAY

Angels Guard Tempted Believers
(Psalm 91)

WEDNESDAY

Do Not Forget the Lord
(Deuteronomy 8:11–20)

THURSDAY

Jesus' Priestly Ministry
(Hebrews 4:14–5:10)

FRIDAY

Jesus, God's Beloved Son
(Matthew 3:13–17)

SATURDAY

The Kingdom of Heaven Is Here
(Matthew 4:12–17)

SUNDAY

Jesus Rejects Satan's Temptations
(Matthew 4:1–11)