

January 18, 2026  
Pursuing the Kingdom: The King in the Wilderness  
Matthew 4:1-11  
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...Theme and connect back to the baptism and identifying with sinners...

Before Jesus began His public ministry, before He preached a single sermon, before He called any of the disciples or healed the sick, He was led into the wilderness. In scripture, the wilderness serves as God's proving ground, a place to reveal the heart, refine character, and establish the foundation for Kingdom ministry. Just as metal is refined and tested in fire before it becomes hardened and useful, so Jesus is tested in the wilderness to prepare Him to inaugurate the Kingdom of God.

Today, we are going to look at a passage of scripture known as the temptation of Jesus. Hebrews 4:12-16, the passage we heard read earlier, helps us see why this matters for us. The Word that Jesus will wield in the wilderness is living and active, piercing to the depths of the human heart. And the one who wielded it is not distant from our weakness. Because Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin, we do not approach a harsh ruler, but a sympathetic High Priest. The King who overcame in the wilderness now invites us to draw near with confidence, to receive mercy and find grace in our time of need. If you are able, please stand in honor of God's word, as I read our scripture passage for today, Matthew 4:1-11. [Read Passage]

Vs. 1 tells us, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Notice that He was led by the Spirit, not dragged by weakness or caught unaware. Sometimes, God's leading takes us into uncomfortable or challenging places, not to punish us, but to prepare us.

The idea that Jesus was intentionally directed by the Spirit of God into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil is a theologically challenging concept. It doesn't take long in the Christian walk to discover that temptations frequently come. We might wonder, does God deliberately orchestrate such tests, or was the wilderness temptation of Jesus an exclusive experience only for Jesus himself?

Christ's experience in the wilderness serves as an example for us in that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted because God wanted His Son, and His followers, to understand Jesus' mission clearly, that Christ had not come to earth as Israel's Conquering King, for that will happen when Jesus comes again in glory, but as her Suffering Servant, eluding back to Isaiah 53 as we saw last week, as Jesus identifies with us by becoming one of us.

David Guzik in his commentary of this passage says, "Temptation is a certainty for everyone. Yet Jesus' temptation was more severe. It was more severe because He was tempted directly by the devil himself, while we contend mainly with lesser demons. It was also more severe because there is a sense in which temptation is "relieved" by giving in, and Jesus never did yield. Therefore He bore levels of temptation we will never know by experience."

And the fact that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted creates an interesting contrast with another event in Scripture. Adam, the first man, was in a lush and fruitful garden when he was tempted. He failed the test, plunging all of humanity into sin and death.

In contrast, Jesus, the Second Adam, was tempted in a dry and barren wilderness, our paradise having been lost. Yet, Jesus passed the test and it is in Him that the curse is broken and we, who are trusting in his finished work on our behalf, have eternal life. Paul made this same point clear in Romans 5:17, “For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:17)

We're also meant to have our minds taken back to the story of Israel in their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. In Deuteronomy 8:1–5, Moses remembered how the Lord God led the people of Israel in the wilderness when he said their time in the wilderness was “to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” We're told that Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days and night, being tempted in every way the nations of Israel was tempted, yet without sin.

It's important to understand, before we go any further, that God does not tempt anyone to sin (James 1:13). But scripture makes it clear that He does allow us to be tested and evaluated. God tested Jesus through adversity in the wilderness, and He applies the same testing in our lives today. Through trials and temptations, we grow in faith and understanding of our mission as servants of His kingdom. Through every test, we become more spiritually mature, hopefully that is, helping us to depend on Him and His Word to overcome life's difficulties and challenges.

Now, we're told that the first temptation comes immediately after these forty days of fasting have ended, when Jesus would have been most vulnerable. Some have called it an appeal to the lust of the flesh. Notice that Matthew writes “when the tempter came.” In our lives, it is not a question of if the tempter will come, but when he will come.

After fasting forty days and forty nights, Jesus was physically hungry, and Satan approached Him, saying, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Again, connecting the forty days and nights back to Israel, what was Israel constantly grumbling about in the wilderness? They constantly grumbled that they didn't have food to eat, even going so far as to wish they were back in Egypt, back in slavery, because they could fill their bellies. This idea of testing is a familiar to the people of God and Jesus will succeed where Israel as a nation failed.

Remember, at his baptism, God declares Jesus His Son, and the Spirit descends like a dove, marking Jesus' anointing and commissioning for His mission. The question asked by Satan is more literally “since You are the Son of God,” instead of “if You are the Son of God.” Satan did not question Jesus' deity. He challenged Him to prove it or demonstrate it through miraculous works. This is not an invitation to commit sin in the traditional sense but an

invitation to use His divine power independently of God's plan, a shortcut if you will. Satan is appealing to a very real human need, hunger, but suggesting a shortcut to satisfy it.

Jesus responds by quoting Deut. 8:3, saying, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God," indicating that a dependence on God's Word is more sustaining than provision alone. Bread satisfies hunger temporarily, but the Word sustains life eternally.

Imagine a student cramming for an exam using only summaries and notes without truly engaging with the textbook. They may pass the test, but they miss the deeper understanding. Similarly, we may satisfy immediate needs by taking shortcuts, but we miss the depth of God's Kingdom if we rely on self-sufficiency rather than obedience.

Many Christians today are materially fed but spiritually empty, demonstrating the importance of prioritizing God's Word over immediate satisfaction. Jesus' example shows us that the Word of God is our best defense against Satan's schemes. And at the same time, Jesus affirmed His mission, submissively entrusting Himself to the Father's plan rather than forcefully paving His own way and meeting His own needs.

The second temptation shifts focus from physical need for public validation. Some have called it the appeal to the pride of life. Satan takes Jesus to the highest point of the temple and says, "[Since] you are the Son of God, throw yourself down," even quoting Psalm 91:11-12. Notice the devil's tactic here. He takes Jesus previous defense, the Word of God, and he quotes it in order to tempt Him, reminding us that even sacred words of scripture can be twisted if removed from context and its divine intent.

Essentially, this is the same argument that Satan used in the garden to deceive Eve, "Did God really say..." I found this quote online while preparing this week that said, "The enemy fears those who live the Word, not just those who know verses." Brothers and sisters, it is important for each us, again, to know the Bible for ourselves, and not to be deceived by someone who quotes the Bible but not accurately or with correct application.

Now, this particular temptation is to create a spectacle, to force God's hand and gain public approval. Jesus' response, as before, is the very same Word of God and this time he quotes Deuteronomy 6:16, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." His point, that God's Kingdom is advanced not through spectacle or manipulation, but through patient submission to God's will. Faith that demands signs or manipulates God for approval is shallow. True faith trusts God's character even when no one is watching and no immediate reward is visible.

The third temptation brings Jesus to a very high mountain, where Satan offers Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor if He will bow down and worship him. Some have called it the appeal to the lust of the eyes. This temptation is about allegiance, not just power. Satan is essentially saying: "You can have everything without suffering, without the cross, without obedience." It is the same temptation many face today, to achieve success, influence, or comfort at the cost of compromise.

This was Satan's most dazzling, yet hollow, offer. He promised power and glory that rightly belonged to Jesus in God's timing and through the cross, but attempted to get Him to take it through an act of supreme spiritual treason, worshiping the devil. The offer of authority was a lie, as true authority comes from submission to the Father, not compromise with Satan.

Jesus rejected this with Deuteronomy 6:13, stating, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." The point being that allegiance to God must be exclusive. Any compromise undermines the Kingdom. Imagine someone offered a lucrative job that requires them to abandon their integrity or core values. It may promise immediate gain, but it will ultimately destroy character. The Kingdom operates on the same principle: shortcuts, compromise, or divided loyalty cannot advance God's purposes. True power and influence come only through obedience and worship of God alone.

Well, the result of Jesus' obedience is immediate. Matthew 4:11 says, "Then the devil left him," and the Gospel of Luke adds "until a more opportune time" which many scholars believe, and I agree, eludes to the fact that the devil appeared at the next point in Jesus' life when he was the most vulnerable to these same temptations, the Garden of Gethsemane. Temptation comes when we are the most vulnerable, when we're hungry, angry, lonely and/or tired. But instead of giving in we need to lean on God and trust in His word and His timing.

And then we're told, "...and angels came and ministered to him." Here we see a clear pattern. Faithfulness is followed by God's provision and care. Jesus does not demand to be served, nor does He manipulate God for His needs. He simply obeys, and God provides.

And this principle applies to us today. God honors faithfulness, and His provision often comes after, not before, obedience. Consider a farmer who plants seeds in spring. He cannot demand a harvest immediately, but through patience and hard work, he receives the fruit. Similarly, spiritual fruit in our lives comes through faithful obedience, not manipulation or shortcuts.

Immediately following this passage, in the text we'll look at next week, Jesus begins His public ministry with the same declaration as his forerunner John the Baptist, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). The timing is intentional. The King has proven Himself faithful as Israel's representative in the Wilderness, and the Kingdom is now ready to be revealed. The wilderness prepares the King and clarifies the nature of His Kingdom. The Kingdom Jesus brings is built on obedience, sustained by trust, and governed by worship. Where Adam failed in the Garden and Israel faltered in the wilderness, Jesus succeeds. He is the faithful Son through whom God's Kingdom is established.

But the Kingdom of God is not advanced through shortcuts, manipulation, or compromise. Many people are tempted to take matters into their own hands, relying on self-sufficiency or seeking attention rather than serving faithfully. The Kingdom calls us to trust God's provision, even in the midst of our need. Just as Jesus refused to give in to the schemes of the enemy, we are called to rely on God's timing and sustenance rather than our own. God's Kingdom requires focused allegiance and obedience to the King.

The wilderness was not the end of Jesus' story, it was the beginning of His public mission. Having defeated the enemy, the King emerged ready to proclaim the kingdom of God. Matthew shows us that Jesus did not merely survive temptation, He overcame it as our representative. His victory in the wilderness points forward to an even greater victory at the cross, where He would once again refuse to save Himself in order to save us.

Tied in with the passage we read from the Book of Hebrews, we are reminded that this King is also our compassionate mediator and High Priest. He identifies with us and

knows the pull of hunger, the pressure to compromise, and the exhaustion of waiting on God. Yet He did not sin. That means when we face our own times in the wilderness, times of testing, dryness, or doubt, we are not left alone or ashamed. We are invited to draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, trusting that the same living Word that sustained Jesus can sustain us.

So the call today is not simply to admire the King in the wilderness, but to follow Him there. To resist the enemy with the truth of God's Word. To trust the Father when obedience is costly. And to cling to Christ, knowing that the King who was tested has triumphed and now reigns, offering mercy and grace to all who come to Him. Let's pray.

Benediction: "To Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen." – Jude 24-25