



Title: Trials in the Wilderness

Pastor Chad E. Billington

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Smythe Street Church

## Opening – Reading

Chris Orenstein (God/Jesus), Martha Babin (Narrator) and Bill McLaughlin (Devil), read the morning's passage each reading as one of the characters in the passage.

### **Matthew 3:16–4:11 (NIV)**

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert 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 does 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.

## About the Readers

*These are three of the leaders of our 12 Step Support Group* that meets on Monday nights at 6:30 PM, Don Parker is away this Sunday. Helping people with life controlling issues of all kinds. They have had a lot of growth lately and good things are happening. Chris serves in prison ministry and had four women baptized this week.

## Trials in the Wilderness

If you have ever decided you were going to read through the New Testament, or even just to read the gospels, or if you've even watched a movie about the life of Jesus, it is quite likely you've run across the passage we are looking at today. Jesus and his trials (or temptations) in the desert.

This is one of those passages that is interesting to try to visualize. It is always one of the scenes I like to watch interpreted in a film depiction of Jesus' life.

While we might not know exactly how the devil showed and offered Jesus all the earth, there is something about this passage that resonates within us, because each of us knows what it is to fight temptation, and the weight of that struggle.

Maybe that is why I like to return to this passage and that **pastors will come here to look for lessons when facing temptation.**

- **Jesus knew scripture and had responses to temptation based in God's word**
- **Jesus didn't use his power to his own advantage, but trusted God to vindicate him.**

There are great lessons for us in those lines of interpretation. Scripture is not just given to us to record events, but also to help us to learn how to live.

This summer in one of my devotional times, I read through this passage again, and I want to share with you what I learned.

## Where the lesson begins, the Baptism...

If we are going to really understand what is going on in the Trials in the Desert, we have to roll back just a few sentences to notice what is happening before.

We are at the beginning of the gospel story. Matthew has introduced us to Jesus' birth. We then are brought forward in time to the ministry of John the Baptist (Jesus' cousin), who is proclaiming that God is sending someone soon to establish his kingdom.

Jesus then goes to John saying it is necessary for him to be baptized, and then we read:

### **Matthew 3:16-17 (NIV)**

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

It is this incident that marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry. As Jesus comes out of the water he sees the Holy Spirit descending, and hears the voice of God saying, 'This is my Son. I love. I am well pleased.'

## **THE FOUNDATION OF JESUS' MINISTRY IS GROUNDED I N HIS IDENTITY AS THE BELOVED SON OF GOD.**

Before Jesus started anything this is what he heard.

## Jesus becomes our way to a new identity as God's children

### **John 1:12 (NIV)**

12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God

If we receive Christ, accept him as our lord, we become children of God. All people are created in God's image, but our relationship changes when we place our trust in Christ and we become adopted into his family and kingdom. In baptism, Paul says in Romans that we put on Christ. And we read in...

**Galatians 4:4–7 (NIV)**

4 But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. 6 Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." 7 So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

Just a note on sons/heir, in the culture in which Paul wrote, men were the one who received an inheritance, but it is significant that he said we all (men and women) are sons and heirs.

This is the good news. God gives you an identity:

**"YOU ARE MY SON. I LOVE YOU I AM PLEASSED WITH YOU."**

When we accept Christ, that proclamation becomes the foundation of our identity and our life. We no longer are trapped in a performance game for God's favour, we receive his grace and love freely by trusting and surrendering to Jesus and what his sacrifice did for us.

## **If you are the Son of God...**

It was after pondering this that I began to read the temptations in a different light. The devil didn't come and say, 'are you hungry, why not make some bread'.

**John 4:3 (NIV)**

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

The temptation was not about the bread, it was about Jesus identity. "IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD"

As I ponder Jesus' confrontation in the desert, I think of why it is in scripture. This is the battle for the ages, it is about the most significant temptations one could face, I think. It is less about what Jesus does and more about who Jesus is.

### **Satan says to Jesus, IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD**

Basically questioning what happened just 40 days before.

You had this experience, you felt the spirit, you heard God speak to you that you have an identity. But is it real?

PERHAPS THE GREATEST THREAT WE FACE IS NOT A WAY WE FALTER, BUT TO DOUBT WHO GOD SAYS WE ARE.

(As I read the passage in this light, the temptations, the trials took on a new reality. Isn't this how Satan comes at us. And his three questions took on new significance.)

### **Stones Into Bread**

#### **John 4:3 (NIV)**

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

As I read this I hear the question, 'if this is real, you should have your needs met.'

If you need something (or think you do) and God loves you, why can't you have it.

We can look at our house, or our car, or our refrigerator, and the question can come. If God loves me than why...

This is where some people fall away.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus replies saying,

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to see parallels to the parable of the sower.

Matthew 4:4 (NIV)

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

It is bigger than bread, it is bigger than what I want, it is bigger than what I need. My identity, comes from the words of who God says I am and what he speaks to me. The foundation of my sonship is my relationship to God.

## Round 2: 'he will command his angels'

Matthew 4:5-6 (NIV)

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

Won't God protect you? If you are God's child, nothing harmful should come your way.

This is a powerful and popular lie, that even gets peddled in some churches.

If you are really God's child you won't get cancer. Your business will always prosper. Your family will be blissful.

And when we don't see those things, we ask the question, 'If I am a child of God..?'

Matthew 4:7 (NIV)

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

Jesus comes back and says, you're not going to get at my identity that way. That's not the measuring stick.

My identity is founded not in what I see with my eyes, but in the voice of the God who tells me who I am, who sends his spirit to my spirit that cries out Abba father. In the words that say, I am his beloved, and he smiles, he is pleased when he looks at me. That is what sets my identity and security and future and hope.

### A better father

You need to know, some of you did not have an earthly father or mother who looked down on you and said they were pleased with you, they loved you, but in Jesus you have a God who chooses you and will adopt you and speak to you the words that in a way no one else can that you are loved and cherished and make him smile.

TODAY I'M MORE CONCERNED THAT YOU UNDERSTAND WHO IN CHRIST YOU ARE AND CAN BE, BECAUSE IT IS FROM THE FOUNDATION OF WHO YOU ARE THAT YOU WILL TRANSFORM WHAT YOU DO.

### Round 3: Who can do better?

#### Matthew 4:8-10

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

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

There is no saying, 'if you are the Son of God', I think Satan gave up on that. The new statement is this, **"I Can do better."**

This is the temptation, to look at what others have, or what we think we're 'missing out on' and ask, is this as good as it gets.

**If our desire in following God is for the externals, we can miss the boat.**

Jesus' reply, Worship the Lord your God and serve him only. It isn't about what I get, it is about who I am.

## A life to celebrate

I've seen people who have overcome these temptations. Some who died of cancer at too young an age, others who have endured faithfully. Sat with my grandmother who turned 95 this month.

Those who overcome, their story is worth telling, their life radiates God's life and love. It is worth it.

The greatest temptation you can face is not an act (although they have consequence), it is to lose sight of who God says you are and calls you to be.