

# TESTING IN THE WILDERNESS

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A young man made an appointment to speak with his pastor. “Pastor, I am so frustrated; I make so many mistakes. Sometimes it seems I can’t do anything right!” he complained.

“Son, what you need is God’s wisdom,” the pastor replied.

“How can I get that kind of wisdom for my life, so I don’t make mistakes anymore?” the young man begged.

“Reading the Bible will help, especially Proverbs,” said the pastor. “But there’s really only one way to gain God’s wisdom: through experience.”

“Okay, I guess I can do that,” said the young man, beginning to feel some hope.

“And there’s only one way to gain such experience,” added the pastor.

Dying to know, the young man blurted, “How is that?!”

“By making mistakes,” answered the wise pastor.

*<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to talk him out of it. “I am the one who needs to be baptized by you,” he said, “so why are you coming to me?”*

*<sup>15</sup> But Jesus said, “It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.” So John agreed to baptize him.*

*<sup>16</sup> After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.”*

*<sup>4:1</sup> Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. <sup>2</sup> For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry. (Matthew 3:13-4:2)*

Let “the wilderness” represent any (and every) barren, arid, lonely place you’ve ever been — emotionally, psychologically, spiritually. Where strange animals howled and chattered at night. Where the winds blew cold and chilled you to the bone. Where the sun’s intensity drained your strength.

Add to that forced fasting — when the Word of God was inaudible and tasteless, and the water of the Spirit was only imaginary — and all hope flees away.

This is the arena of testing, where the enemy’s voice crackles temptingly, sounding so much like your own voice, reasoning with you to capitulate, appealing to your senses and self-importance, justifying a seemingly slight and logical deviation due to the extremity of the circumstances.

On the heels of the most momentous occasion of his life (to that point) — Jesus had been baptized by John, anointed by the Spirit, and affirmed by the Father in an audible voice — Jesus’ faith was put to the test.

It is often this way for each of us. A significant moment — particularly a meeting with God or a personal accomplishment — stimulates personal satisfaction and pride, and just as quickly turns into an opportunity for serving self-interests, even depravity.

Gorging ourselves with what we had formerly been denying. Taking risks that we know are foolish. Taking advantage of people or things to flatter or fatten ourselves.

Why would we do it? How could we so suddenly turn from our higher values? Why would we abandon sound judgment? Why would we debase ourselves? Why would we throw away what God has built up in our lives? How could we disregard God's Word?

Try to remember this maxim: When you feel strong or noble, you are at your point of greatest risk.

It is worthy of note that "*Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.*" This was no accident; it was part of His preparation and training. Mark used even stronger language: "*The Spirit then **compelled** Jesus to go into the wilderness*" (Mark 1:12).

In order to become the person God wants you to be and do the work God has prepared for you to do, you also must be prepared and trained. The Holy Spirit will take you there. How will your test come, and how will you respond?

Jesus' test was administered by the devil. Seems like a strange choice as God's assistant, but I suppose that is part of his punishment for rebelling against God — in the end, even his insurgence must serve the greater purpose of the One he hates: God — who "*causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them*" (Romans 8:28).

The name, Satan, means Accuser. The devil is the chief spirit of accusation, which, when it is true, is confrontational and humbling and provides the opportunity of change and growth, and, when it is false, is painfully humiliating and injurious and destructive.

In this setting, the devil's accusation challenges one's personal sense of values and identity. His challenge to Jesus was: "If you are the Son of God..." His challenge to you will be similar: "So, you think you're a Christian, do you? Well, if you really are God's child... (take advantage of God's grace and use your authority for your own satisfaction)."

John wrote: "*For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.*" (1 John 2:16-17; NASB) As I said to you last Sunday, if you cling to these things you will share their doom. But if instead you do what God wants from you, you will escape destruction and enjoy everlasting life.

It all comes down to this: these three categories — lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of life — summarize all of our wilderness tests.

For instance, Jesus' first challenge was this: "*The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become a loaf of bread'*" (Luke 4:3). After forty days without food, even the Son of Man was hungry. It was a legitimate need. But what would He do about it? The lust of the flesh demands immediate satisfaction, and the only way for that to happen in the wilderness is to use your supernatural authority to transform stones into bread.

Could Jesus have done that feat? Of course. Would it have served the Father's purpose for His life? No. He took on flesh and blood for one purpose: not to satisfy His own cravings, but to offer His life as a ransom for many other people.

So, the challenger was challenged: "*Jesus told him, 'No! The Scriptures say, "People do not live by bread alone'"*" (Luke 4:4). Do you remember the time when Jesus waited beside a well while His disciples went shopping for lunch? While they were gone He spoke with a woman who came to the well for water about the Kingdom of God and about her life. It was a divine appointment! When the men returned, Jesus told them, "*I have a kind of food you know nothing about*" (John 4:32). Jesus was feeding on the presence and activity of the Father in His life. He was nourished by the Spirit's anointing, as He did the Father's will. And so will you be. Don't trade the continuing anointing of the Spirit for a momentary satisfaction to please the lust of the flesh!

The second challenge was this: "*Then the devil took him up and revealed to him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. 'I will give you the glory of these kingdoms and authority over them,' the devil said, 'because they are mine to give to anyone I please. I will give it all to you if you will worship me'"*" (Luke 4:5-7). Have you ever enjoyed the cityscape of San Francisco on a clear day or night? How it glitters with lights or the reflected sun, like a mound of jewels! How it pleases the eyes.

This beauty and the authority over the world's kingdoms could have been His for a "song and a dance." One act of worship and He could have avoided the cross. A sacrifice of praise instead of a sacrifice of life. Doesn't it sound appealing?

But again the challenger was challenged: "*Jesus replied, 'The Scriptures say, "You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him'"*" (Luke 4:8).

Worship is not a light matter. It is not a song and dance. It is the surrender of the right to control to a higher power. Worship belongs to the God who made us, and to Him alone. If you seek "glory and authority" for yourself, you are in danger of surrendering to any dazzling presentation. Never surrender!

The third challenge was this: "*Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, 'If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, "He will order his angels to protect and guard you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone'"*" (Luke 4:9-11).

The pride of life is a particularly deceptive snare. Suggesting that you are impervious to ruin, it begs for outrageous risks. Risk is a normal part of the life of faith, but foolish risk is not. Only one thing qualifies a risk as wise: that it is the express will of God for you at that moment. Ignoring God's will to take a leap that seems promising in other ways is the pinnacle of foolishness.

Jesus flatly countered, "*The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the Lord your God'*" (Luke 4:12). There is only one time in Scripture that we are invited to test God: in the area of managing our wealth — "*Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,' says the Lord of hosts, 'if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows'"*" (Malachi 3:10; NASB).

Jesus conquered the Accuser by declaring God's words. Not just those words that He found in a book, but those words that had become a part of His life. He quoted living truth and the devil was silenced.

How do God's written words become living words? By thoughtful reading and reflective meditation. By moving them from your head alone to your head and heart. And by practicing them in your daily life.

And that's what wilderness testing is all about: finding out what truth you really live by. Talk is cheap. What words govern your heart? Undergird your values? Guide your choices?

Dig deep until you make God's words your foundation. Carefully weed out all the rest, no matter how popular, no matter how pleasant.

Don't shy away from life's tests; if they only came when you were "ready," they wouldn't be tests, because they are testing how you trust in God for what you *do not* possess in yourself.

And don't whine about the testing, for *"The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure"* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Instead, enter the testing with joy — rejoicing for the outcome. *"When your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything"* (James 1:3-4).