



St. Peter's Lutheran Church

Pursuing God in Isolation

Session Five: Isolated in the Desert

Matthew 4:1-11

MAIN POINT

Jesus was isolated in the wilderness but overcame temptation by relying on His Father. He gives us the same power to do so today through the Holy Spirit.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What comes to mind when you think of being tempted? Do you typically view being tempted as a sin? Explain.

What is the connection in your life between being or feeling isolated and the difficulty of overcoming temptation? Why do you think this is?

From the foundation of our very existence, mankind has faced temptation to sin. Sin frequently presents itself as pleasing, enjoyable, or worthwhile, though in reality it is harmful to us and dishonorable to God. Further, temptation often presents itself when we are vulnerable in times of isolation. Fortunately, we have a savior in Jesus who knows exactly what it's like to be tempted and who provides His followers power to overcome it, just as He did in Matthew 4.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 4:1-11.

Verse 1 tells us that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted.

Why do you think God's Spirit did this at the beginning of Jesus' ministry? How might His being led into isolation have made it more difficult to overcome temptation?

What do these events tell us about what it's like to be led by God's Spirit? What does it teach us about the nature of temptation?

Being led by the Holy Spirit means we depend on the Spirit's guidance for direction. It does not mean, however, that we will not face temptation or that the road He leads us on will be easy, just as it was not for Jesus. In fact, we should expect temptation to come each and every day. When Jesus was led by God's Spirit, He was led right into the middle of temptation; that's encouraging for us, who are in spiritual battles of our own, because it means it's not sin to be tempted. The question is what happens next.

Do you usually expect temptation in times of isolation? How can expecting it help you defeat it?

Jesus' first temptation is in verse 3. In your own words, what did the Devil tempt Him with?

Sometimes temptation is physical, just as it was for Jesus. The Devil was tempting Jesus to trust in Himself instead of God to take care of His own needs. This is the nature of most temptation—it's a question of whether we have to rely on ourselves or whether we can rely on God to meet our needs.

What do we communicate about the character of God when we trust in Him to meet our needs? What about when we feel like we have to meet our own needs?

Jesus' second temptation is found in verse 6. Read Psalm 91:1-12. How did Satan twist these verses to tempt Jesus?

Whereas the first temptation was physical, the second was more emotional. The Devil heard Jesus quote Scripture, so he quoted it right back to Him, this time misusing it. The implication was that God would surely protect Jesus from harm if indeed He was His Son. Jesus knew this to be wrong; His whole mission was leading to His death. He also knew that no matter what happened, God was still trustworthy, so He refused to test God and instead He chose to trust God.

The final temptation of Jesus is found in verse 9. What did the Devil tempt Jesus with here?

How was the temptation calling God's wisdom and character into question? In what sense does temptation always do this?

Jesus was and is the rightful ruler of all the kingdoms of the universe. The question in this temptation was whether Jesus would accept and trust in God's means of bringing His rule to fruition, or whether He would take matters into His own hand. God's plan required a cross, and Jesus chose to accept it. When He did, He showed that during temptation, we can trust in the character and promises of God no matter how appealing the temptation might be.

In what ways have you been tempted by your physical needs, pride, and power in "wilderness" places where your faith is tested? How does Jesus' example here show you how to respond to those temptations?

From verse 11, what happened at the end of the time Jesus was in the wilderness? When have you seen God's blessings after staying faithful through a difficult, "desert" season?

We often view these events as a time when Satan attacked Jesus at Jesus' most vulnerable. In what sense was Jesus at a place of strength as He was coming off of a long period of fasting? How might fasting and prayer serve to give us strength from God in times of isolation and temptation?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Name a situation where you have confused the desert with being deserted by God. What did you learn in that situation, or what are you learning now?

Based on your relationship with the Lord currently, what purpose do you imagine God might have in allowing you to face a difficult situation: to prepare you, to purify you, or to clarify your priorities? How might you seek to pray about this regularly?

What can you do, practically, to make the most of the desert seasons you find yourself in?

PRAYER

Thank God that He always has good purposes, even in the times you feel deserted. Confess the resentment you feel in those seasons, and invite Him to help you draw near to Him in the ways He intends.

COMMENTARY

| MATTHEW 4:1-11

4:1-4. Jesus' temptation immediately followed His baptism. Many of God's people have faced strong temptations immediately after spiritual mountaintop experiences. Jesus' baptism has been viewed as the beginning of His public ministry. In His temptation, Jesus faced choices regarding how He would accomplish the mission God had given Him. Would He choose God's way or Satan's way?

At the beginning of these temptations, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert. Did the Spirit do the tempting? No, the tempter did. Although led by the Spirit into the desert, Jesus was tempted by the devil. An important note of difference between the work of the Spirit and the work of Satan is evident in this verse. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, but the devil was responsible for the temptation. This verse warns us that we must never blame God for temptation nor should we view Satan as having power equal to God's. The devil is always bound by what God permits.

Satan attempted to prove Jesus faithless. God permitted Jesus to be tested to demonstrate His faithfulness. Satan attempted to create division between God and His Son. The devil works against God's purposes and God's people. The temptations Jesus faced were real temptations. Yet He steadfastly and repeatedly resisted temptation (Heb. 4:15).

The temptations recorded in Matthew 4 happened after Jesus had fasted forty days and forty nights. After a 40-day fast, Jesus was hungry. Jesus was both God and man. As a man, Jesus experienced the same kinds of physical needs we experience. What did the devil mean by the phrase "if you are the Son of God"? The phrase also could be translated "since You are the Son of God." Satan tempted Jesus to use His power for selfish gain. Would Jesus base His kingdom on selfish desires or on service? The devil looked at the desert with its barren rocks and tempted Jesus to tell these stones to become bread. Jesus responded to the devil's temptations by quoting Scripture. In this instance He quoted from Deuteronomy 8:3 to remind him that man does not live on bread alone. Jesus knew that human beings need physical food. But He also recognized people's greater need for spiritual food. We need every word that comes from the mouth of God. God's Word can satisfy our deepest needs.

4:5-7. Satan took Jesus to the holy city of Jerusalem and had Jesus stand on the highest point of the temple. Satan tempted Jesus to throw Himself down from the high point. The devil quoted the written Word of God in his attempt to convince Jesus to claim God's promise of protection.

Satan quoted Psalm 91:11-12. These verses refer to God's protection of the faithful who remain committed to Him. As we might expect, he twisted the meaning of Scripture.

The psalm does not teach that God's people are free to abuse God's power to satisfy a personal whim. Why did Satan tempt Jesus to abuse God's power in this way? People are drawn to the spectacular. If Jesus jumped and was rescued in a supernatural way, He could gain followers. But He rejected the temptation to build His kingdom in this manner. Jesus again responded to temptation with the Word of God: Do not put the Lord your God to the test (see Deut. 6:16).

Jesus refused to abuse God's power. He refused to build His kingdom with spectacular displays of power. Jesus resisted the temptation to bypass the cross and His redemptive mission by refusing to yield to this temptation.

4:8-11. In this temptation Satan tried to tempt Jesus with instant power apart from the way of the cross. He tempted Jesus to use worldly methods to achieve His purposes. The setting was a very high mountain. The devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. The devil claimed the rule of the world and offered to resign his claim if Jesus would bow down and worship him. Jesus faced a clear choice. He could follow the will of the devil or that of God. Jesus would receive glory after His death and resurrection, but Satan tried to persuade Jesus to take the easy way and receive instant power, authority, and wealth apart from the way of the cross. Jesus knew, however, that the end does not justify the means. God's will cannot be accomplished by worldly methods. Note Jesus' firm response: Away from me, Satan! In this response to the devil, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:13: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only. God alone is worthy of worship. Jesus resolved to center His life on God's purpose. Jesus refused to resort to worldly methods to achieve God's purposes. Jesus knew that God's will cannot be done apart from doing things God's way.