



## Jesus: In The Desert

Whenever it's hot outside I'd like for you to think about this lesson. The desert is where the Father drove the Son to afflict himself, and stand face to face with the devil. If you've been reading these lessons in the order I've presented them, which I hope you have, then you've already looked at Jesus, and seen God, on the cross, in the sand, and in the temple. Now, as we continue our journey with Jesus, as we take a close look at his thinking, and his attitudes, and his character, let's go to Matthew chapter four to follow him into the desert.

- Mat 4:1** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
- Mat 4:2** When he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was hungry afterward.
- Mat 4:3** The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."
- Mat 4:4** But he answered, "**It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'** "
- Mat 4:5** Then the devil took him into the holy city. He set him on the pinnacle of the temple,
- Mat 4:6** and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will put his angels in charge of you.' and, 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you don't dash your foot against a stone.' "
- Mat 4:7** Jesus said to him, "**Again, it is written, 'You shall not test the Lord, your God.'** "
- Mat 4:8** Again, the devil took him to an exceedingly high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory.
- Mat 4:9** He said to him, "I will give you all of these things, if you will fall down and worship me."
- Mat 4:10** Then Jesus said to him, "**Get behind me, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and you shall serve him only.'** "
- Mat 4:11** Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and served him.

This is the moment when Jesus has his most violent, up-front, and visceral conversation with Satan, up until the time when he enters Gethsemane and goes to his death. And you would expect that something would be leading up to this engagement with Satan, but

what you find is that Jesus' moment of battle came right after his moment of splendor and glory at the very beginning of his earthly ministry.

What happened right before Jesus went into the desert was that he went into the water. He was baptized by John in the Jordan river. That was a pretty impressive scene. As he came up out of the water the heavens open up and this bright light shines on him, and the spirit of God, in the visual form of a dove, came down from heaven, right there in front of everybody, and hovers over Jesus. Then, to top things off, this voice, seemingly out of nowhere, says, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am greatly pleased."

WOW – what a moment for Jesus! What a glorious way to announce, at least to John, who certainly heard it and saw it, whether anyone else did or not, that Jesus was the Messiah sent to save the world. Now that's how to start a ministry! The Father went all out to make sure people knew who his Son was, and that he was absolutely delighted with him.

What do you think would happen after that? Some huge party, right? I would predict a giant festival for Jesus would have begun right at that moment. The crowds cheering, people dancing, voices being lifted in praise... but that's not what happened. Instead, the spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

In fact, while Matthew tells us the spirit led him into the desert, Mark says it DROVE him into the desert. This is not what you'd expect to be the follow up to Jesus' great, climactic moment. Have you ever discovered that some of your worst moments in life come right after your best moments? It's sort of like you step out of the dark and somebody turns on the light, and suddenly, unexpectedly you're blinded, even to the point of it being painful. You may have wanted the light because you were stumbling around in the dark, but when it hits you that hard it's intrusive, and even feels a bit violent.

I wonder if that's why so many newly weds go into crisis. The wedding is so stressful for the bride; she wants everything to be just perfect, but the groom just wants it done. To him, it doesn't have to be perfect. He just wants her, and that's perfect enough. Typical male ideal. Same goals, but completely different thoughts of how to achieve it.

Then here comes the honeymoon! Great time, wonderful time, most amazing time of their lives! Then they go home together, back to work, facing the same old world they had to face before, but now they have to deal with each other as well. And suddenly, unexpectedly, you have that first conflict. What happened to the honeymoon? Now you're wondering what you've done with your life; you're positive you shouldn't have married this person. They're not at all who you thought they were, and you just know you're never going to get past this. It's like our worst moments come right after our best.

Just recently I'd had some great things happen in my life. I had been given a great review at work, and a raise, I'd been offered a different job within the company that was a lot better than what I had been doing. A couple of people had talked to me about God and I

feel like I helped them, and I was feeling really good. Then my wife and I were sitting in our kitchen one morning and I heard a cracking sound, looked up just in time to see our entire back yard collapsed twenty feet down into the creek behind our house. Suddenly, we were in jeopardy of losing our home. And at our ages, that would have been absolutely devastating.

My first thought was, “God, what’s going on? What did I do? I’m sorry! I won’t do it again!” I’d been on a spiritual high for some time, then suddenly everything seemed to be falling apart. This could have been a disaster we could never have recovered from, the financial loss would have been so devastating.

I wonder, if it had been us in the same situation Jesus was in, if we’d have said what I just said to God when my crisis began. Aren’t we always told that if you’re ever tempted by the devil, if you ever struggle with temptation or sin, if you ever find yourself in this spiritual conflict it’s because you got off course? Because if you’re walking with God and doing everything right, everything you should be doing; going to church, praying regularly, volunteering, working hard, that old devil can’t mess with you, right? That it’s only when you’re off course that you begin to experience the turbulence of temptation or trials.

But Jesus shows us here, that way of thinking is absolutely not true! Don’t let anyone tell you that because you’re struggling with temptation, or going through a crisis, or going through some difficult or painful time in your life, that God is somehow mad at you and this is the result of a wrong decision in your life.

In this case, it was the spirit of God that drove Jesus into the desert for the express purpose of being tempted by the devil. I know this may sound crazy, because God doesn’t want us to sin, and we’re supposed to pray, “Lead me not into temptation”, right?

Why would you have to pray that? Do you ever have to pray something that couldn’t happen? You don’t pray for hair if you have hair. You pray for hair if you’re bald. Praying for things you already have, or for things that have no basis in reality, is a waste of time and ridiculous. So, when we’re told to pray that we will not be led into temptation, what does that tell us? It tells us that God would indeed lead us into temptation. God never tempts us to do evil, but he can allow us to get into situations where we will be tested. And what we find through his son, Jesus, is that he **does** do that! Why?

Is it because God is malicious or loves dangling you over the fires of Hell? Because God is like a killer whale playing with a baby seal? That’s an image you won’t forget! NO! It’s because God doesn’t want you to live your life, or to think that your spiritual vibrancy is accomplished by running away from the crises and temptations of the world. He wants you to discover that you can run right into the wilderness, into the desert, step right into Satan’s home court, into the most pressure-cooker moments, and come out victorious, and successful, holding your head up knowing that God has given you more strength within than there is pressure outside.

God didn't send Jesus into the desert so Jesus could sin, or so that his holiness could collapse. He sent him there so the evil one would know that he has no foothold on the Son of God, and so we would know that God can drive us through every temptation and trial to live a life of holiness. The devil has no hold on us unless we give it to him, and we discover that through the trials and temptations we face.

So Satan comes to Jesus with certain temptations which we can use, at this time, to reflect on our own struggles. "Jesus was led into the desert to be tempted by the devil. And after forty days he was hungry." Now, isn't that a bit of an understatement? So, he was hungry? If you'd put me in there it would be more like, "and Lewis missed supper so he was really hungry." Or, "he only had a cup of coffee this morning, so boy was he hungry!" After 40 days I'd probably feel like I was dying, assuming I made it that far in the first place.

Do you ever hear people say, "I'm starving"? It's really not true, at least as far as I know in the area where I live. Most of us have absolutely no idea what real, severe hunger is, much less have any concept of starvation. When somebody says they're starving, we could easily tell them, "No you're not starving! There are children in Africa starving." And for some of us, like me for instance, you could add that they could go a month on what their body has stored up already.

So Jesus was out there for forty days and he was hungry. I think what God wants us to know here is that Jesus was not fully God and **sort of** Man, which I think is sometimes how we think about him. Because God wouldn't really be hungry, and that's why Jesus could do this for forty days. But what I want you to know is that the humanity of Jesus was absolutely real and he was absolutely hungry; maybe even starving.

**Mat 4:3** The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."

**Mat 4:4** But he answered, "**It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'**"

Now we've all been to churches that, at one time or another, have spent some time on this passage, but I want to look at one particular aspect of this temptation. It's that what Jesus is really dealing with in this moment, what Satan is trying to create, is a framework that God simply does not care. And I wonder, how many times in our lives, even those who are strict followers of Jesus Christ, struggle with this thought permeating our minds, that God really doesn't care.

I mean, we can do all the God talk and sing all the great songs, and personally speaking, I love to sing about God, but when something is going on in your life, and you're praying and you're asking God to meet your need and God seems to be very, very slow; when God doesn't seem to be coming through, doesn't this thought cross your mind, "Maybe God doesn't really care about me."? And when you have those moments when you really have to struggle with this issue, since God doesn't seem to care, I need to take care of it myself. You'll be facing the same struggle Jesus was facing right then.

What Satan was saying to him was, “Jesus, you’re hungry! The Father has made you sit out here for forty days with nothing to eat! Just turn these stones into bread. You can do it; it’s within your capacity. Just meet your needs.”

I’m convinced this is one of the primary frustrations, struggles, and temptations we all face in our lives. My experience is that rarely does God show up before I feel the need. And let’s be honest, God almost never shows up just in the nick of time either, does he? We like to think he does, and tell others about the times it may seem that he did, but the truth is we almost always have to wait for God to meet our needs in his time, which is usually nowhere close to our time table, or how we would have scheduled things. Sometimes God doesn’t show up until way past the time we feel he should have. And about that time we’re thinking, “Okay, God, I know there are 6.5 billion people on the planet and you’re running a little late, but a little earlier would have helped.”

And I think that in a society where so many people are no longer living in a natural cultural environment to find a husband or wife, I think one of the most difficult things to do, the greatest struggle is to trust God for a spouse to have as a life-long partner. Part of it may be that we’re growing up later.

I don’t mean physically. Scientists say that perhaps because of the chemicals used in today’s foods or something, that the rate at which the body forms more mature appearance has been accelerated, so younger people look older sometimes. What I’m referring to is the mental and emotional age; the age at which a person is more ready, and capable of accepting proper responsibility for themselves and for someone else.

I mean, there was a time when children were 14 or 15 and working in the fields, learning to build and fix things, they were soldiers in the armies of the kings, or running businesses. But today, when we hit 25 a lot of us are still contemplating, “What am I going to do when I grow up?” I mean, the maturity and ability to take care of ourselves seems to be coming later and later in life.

It’s kind of hard, and to be truthful, irresponsible, to get married until you’re at least *sort of* an adult. But we keep pushing adulthood into, like 53 or 54 and sometimes even older for some of us. That would fit me. Read the bio about my youth from the About Us page and you’ll see what I mean. So what’s happening is we’re getting married as children really. But part of the difficulty is that there’s this natural stage in life where you meet people. Then when you leave that there are actually very few places to meet people you are attracted to or compatible with.

But a part of all this is trusting God for that right person in your life instead of feeling like you have to go out and find them yourself, then if you make a bad choice, asking God to fix it for you. As human beings we don’t really know how to find the right person most of the time, because we have this habit of looking at the outside, and not caring one bit about the inside. I think it’s sad that we go through this dating ritual, looking for Mr. Right or Ms. Perfect, the blonde cheerleader or the iron-bodied captain of the football

team, and not giving any thought to their character. What we end up doing so many times is that we pass up the real treasures, and grab hold of the trash that looks good.

I know it can be difficult to wait for God, because when God doesn't seem to care you feel like you have to take care of it yourself. And I find different dynamics with men than I do with women. What you find is that guys want to marry someone for pure physical reasons. Men are visually oriented in their tendency to be attracted to someone. So they keep passing up these incredible people because they don't meet this ideal that they've been just absolutely ingrained with growing up watching television and watching movies. And, at the same time, women grow up wanting a man who is this perfect fit; a spiritual man who follows **them**. "I want a **leader** who does what I **tell him**."

So, we've got this tension on both ends. But the problem is trusting God that **he** cares more about your life than **you** do.

And a lot of us have our own issues with bread. We're not really that hungry for bread, are we, like Jesus was in that moment after forty days without eating. But I know this; there's something you're hungry for. There's a hunger inside you and you feel like God just is not going to come through for you. And if you don't feel hungry right now, but you're in one of those quite satisfied moments; you'll face it one of these days. There will be a moment when you'll wonder, "Does God really care about me?" Right then, what you're going to hear is this voice from the evil one, "Look, you've waited way too long. You've waited long enough. Forty days is more than reasonable, by any measure. Just go ahead and turn these stones into bread."

And you'll think you won't have that temptation because you can't turn stone into bread. But you'd be amazed at how often we do that. When you start believing that God doesn't care about you, so you need to take care of yourself; when you start believing that lie, "God helps those who help themselves" (it's NOT in the bible), and you believe you need to start circumventing God's process in your life and meet your own needs, and do it in a way that dishonors God, you've succumbed to this first temptation.

Then it moves on.

**Mat 4:5** Then the devil took him into the holy city. He set him on the pinnacle of the temple,

**Mat 4:6** and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will put his angels in charge of you.' and, 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you don't dash your foot against a stone.' "

**Mat 4:7** Jesus said to him, "**Again, it is written, 'You shall not test the Lord, your God.'** "

So, if that first temptation was attacking God's character in relation to his goodness, you know, does God really care, is he really good? Then this second one, if you bring it down to the bottom line is saying, "Does God really know what he's doing?"

I mean, what is God thinking? Have you ever looked at your life and thought to yourself, "I'm following the Lord, but I'm not sure God knows where he's going. I don't know

what he's doing with my life. I have no idea what's going on here." You may think, "I want to go where God wants me to go, but I don't like the way he's getting me there." Doesn't that make sense? A lot of us who follow Christ have already agreed on the end goal, but the struggle for so many of us isn't the end or the goal, but the means, and the process.

If we'd sit down and take a survey, you'd be like the perfect follower of Jesus Christ if all we did was ask you about the end goals. We'd tell them, "Yeah, I want this, and I want that; I want exactly what God wants." In fact, most of us who follow Christ have the right answers, and we'd get an "A Plus" on wanting the same things that God wants. For most of us, it's not the wanting the same things, it's the part about getting there the way God takes us, the way he wants us to get there. That's the real challenge isn't it?

What the devil is saying is, "Look, Jesus, I have an idea." He takes him up to the top of the highest point of the temple and says, "Just throw yourself down because the angels will not let you get hurt." What he's saying to Jesus is, "Look, you don't have to go through this whole, persecution, suffering, rejection, crucifixion thing. It just doesn't take that much to impress people. If you want to be king over humanity and master of the world, just jump right now and everyone is going to be really impressed. I mean, you're going to hear like a global, WHOA!!! DID YOU SEE THAT?"

Let's face it, we like miracles far more than we like sacrifice. We like a demonstration of power far more than we appreciate a demonstration of character. What Jesus was demonstrating with his death wasn't his power. Wouldn't some hemlock be less painful? That's what Socrates did. At the same time, if Jesus had a choice, why go through all that gruesome violence?

Most of us have probably seen that movie "The Passion of the Christ". That was a brutal situation! It would've been much easier to just do it quickly. Swallow poison, or just jump, and the angels wouldn't let him get hurt. After all, he's so important to God, right? He's his only begotten son. The heavens were opened and the Father shouted out, that he's so pleased with him. He's not going to let anything happen to him, right?

The devil is telling him, "They'll be so impressed they'll just make you king right on the spot, and you won't have to go through all the pain and problems with the other way."

I think a lot of us are susceptible to this particular temptation. The temptation is to believe that God really doesn't know what he's doing, or how to get things done, and our way is better than his. That, in the end, if we're really proactive in our dreams and our own ambitions, that we can get God to climb on board with us. We can get God to join us because the means are always justified by the end.

But, you see, to God, the means are why he died. It's not just about the end. Do you really think Jesus had to die for God to be victorious over humanity? I don't think so. Everything God wanted to do he could've done without dying, except save us. Which is an amazing thing.

God wasn't up in heaven running around in circles screaming, "It's all out of control, they're all over the place! They're like a bunch of ants! They're propagating and growing and I can't stop all this!" He could have stopped it just like that; brought an end to the violence and sin in the world just like that. He could've brought peace instantly. Do you know how? By getting rid of all of **us**.

God has chosen a much more complex and painful process for himself, because who we are is as important to God as where we finish this race. To God, the means are NEVER justified by the end. To God, the means **are** the end. How we choose to live our lives, how we choose to *flesh it out*, is the evidence that we are doing it God's way. That is precisely why the doctrine of "Once Saved – Always Saved" is so wrong. You cannot say you believe in God, and live your life any way you choose, or start out following Christ then quit and go back to your own ways, and still expect to finish the race as God would have you finish. It's not so much the goal as the means to the goal.

Satan is saying to Jesus, "God's way is the cross. Lots of suffering, rejection, agonizing pain; all ending in your hanging, blood drenched and hurting, on a cross. My way is easier. You jump, the angels save you, everybody's impressed, they worship you, you reach the same goal without all the problems. Everything will be fine."

And Jesus' response is, "It is written, you're not to put the Lord, your God, to the test." And don't think for one minute that God will allow you to get away with choosing **your** means to accomplish even **his** ends. Don't think for a minute God is up in heaven saying, "I'm just so glad he just got it done. I'm so glad they broke the rules and defiled their character and integrity to accomplish my purpose in the world."

God is **not** impressed by that in **any** way whatsoever!

Then there's this third temptation.

**Mat 4:8** Again, the devil took him to an exceedingly high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory.

**Mat 4:9** He said to him, "I will give you all of these things, if you will fall down and worship me."

**Mat 4:10** Then Jesus said to him, "**Get behind me, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and you shall serve him only.'**"

**Mat 4:11** Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and served him.

This temptation just absolutely blows my mind! Have you ever had someone stand right in front of you and just blatantly lie? I mean it was so obvious that you just couldn't believe they would do that? Those are the people who apparently live by the adage, "There's a sucker born every minute." I think P.T. Barnum said that. They must think it means everybody but them, right?

Then, if you catch someone in a lie, and they admit it, then they tell you something else, don't you sometimes wonder if they're even telling the truth then? It's hard to believe

someone can stand there and lie to your face twice. Well, it is for me sometimes, but people do, all the time!

So I look at this and I see Satan saying, "Worship me." I mean, this takes a lot of gall, because Jesus is the one who should be worshipped, and Satan knows that. This is like the ultimate sell, the consummate pitch. "I'll give you all the kingdoms, if you'll just bow down and worship me!" What kind of person does it take to look at God and say, "Hey, look, I'll give you everything that's yours if you'll worship me."? I mean, isn't that why he's Satan?

And it occurred to me that if Satan could actually convince himself that he could convince Jesus to worship him, he's absolutely convinced he can get **you** to worship him, and he's absolutely convinced he can get me to worship him. And beyond that, if it was Satan's hope that Jesus would worship anything other than God, the creator of the universe, the redeemer, then his ultimate desire is to get **you** to worship anything other than God.

And here's the temptation. He says, "Look, everything you want, I'll give you if you'll just transfer your trust to me. Jesus, trust me and I'll give you everything that's supposed to be yours without you having to pay the price. You will get everything you want, but loose everything you are."

I think this is the dilemma for a lot of us. You know that first temptation is that God really isn't good, doesn't really love you, doesn't really care about you. You've got to learn to take care of yourself. You know the lie, "God helps those who help themselves." And the second temptation is that God doesn't really know what he's doing. Just go ahead and get it done because God doesn't really understand the real world, right? Because God lives in ideals, so he doesn't really understand how hard life is, and the peer pressure we're under. So just go ahead and get it done, and it'll be alright in the end.

But in this third temptation it's really more core and more essential. What he's tell us is you can have everything you want if you'll just give up who you were created to be. And I wonder how many of us have been willing to give up that one? It drives me crazy, but do you know what's true? Good people do not always succeed. Have you seen that? And evil people sometimes have incredible success.

Years ago there was a Rabbi Kushner who wrote a book called, "Why bad things happen to good people." I remember that book, but I've always really wondered, why do good things happen to bad people? That one really ticks me off. Bad things happen to good people because we live in a dangerous world with a lot of bad people and bad things like bad diseases, bad pollution, bad weather. I understand that things are going to happen to even good people. We all suffer these things.

But on the flip side, why is it when somebody clearly violates God's laws and character, there's no "**Bam! Gotcha!**"? Well, except for one thing. **Bam**, I'd be gone, so I'm kind of glad God doesn't do that. One reason good things happen to bad people is because,

quite frankly, we're just not all that good. This is true about all of us, every one of us, because as good as we may think we are, we're not all that impressive.

So, you see, that's why I'm so glad **he's** God, and I'm not. He says he rains on the righteous and the unrighteous. For some reason God is an eternally optimistic romantic. He believes that even the most wicked and vile person can turn and be changed.

But in this particular temptation Satan is saying he'll give you anything you want if you'll just change who you put your trust in, who you worship, who you give thanks to, who you point to. And I don't know how you escape this peer pressure. We live in a world saturated with religions, and we seem inclined to worship anything except God. People will pray to crystals, amulets, pyramids, animals, humans. We have a propensity to pray to anything and everything except God. Even in our modern culture, we worship money, possessions, luck, anything we put ahead of God in our lives.

You know why? Because only God holds us accountable for who we are. When you pray to the living God you're praying **up** to someone who pulls you **up** to be who you cannot be alone. But when you pray to anything else, and worship anything else, you pray beneath yourself and you become less than you were created to be.

Satan will let you worship him, and require nothing in the way of holiness from you. Gods who are not gods hold you accountable for nothing. And isn't it strange that even in Christianity we pray to people that Jesus served, and saved and healed. They would be absolutely incensed that we pray to them. So we have this religion that prays to Peter, and Paul, and Mary, and to the saints. We have a religion that prays to everyone else except the God who died for us.

When Jesus walked into the desert he made it clear that he is the only one who can walk us through the darkest, most painful, most dangerous, most trying times of our lives, and lead us through it all **to come out the person God wants us to be.**