

## **The Word in the Wilderness - Matthew 4:5-11**

Sermon – Pastor Joe Davis

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### **I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT**

I was on a spring break mission trip to the Coshatta Indians of Louisiana with about 20 other students from Moody Bible Institute, including my good friend and roommate, Todd. We were working with a missionary and pastor who lived on the reservation. Our job was to visit homes, host community game nights, share our testimonies at special meetings, and a couple of us were assigned to preach messages at Sunday services. Being a highly introverted person, especially at that point in my life, I was a nervous wreck for much of the trip, but I learned to pray a lot more and God provided what I needed and brought about some incredible growth in my walk with him.

Now my friend Todd was a lot more outgoing than me and he wasn't suffering the same kind of stress that I was. And he had actually decided to come on this mission trip with a bit of an ulterior motive. You see, there was this really cute girl Todd had his eye on. And when he found out she was spending her spring break on a mission trip to Louisiana, he suddenly had an intense urge to spend his spring break there too! Not only was it a great way to serve the Lord, but there were some potential side benefits for him as well. What better opportunity would he ever have to break the ice and work on building a relationship with this girl?

Well, several days into the trip it was becoming apparent that Todd's love interest was not interested in him. Try as he might, he simply couldn't break through or get any indication that she was even slightly interested. Despite all his best efforts, she was continuing to keep an impenetrable wall between them. You see, she had actually come on the mission trip with the right motives. She wanted to grow in the Lord and share the gospel, and she knew she was set apart by God to eventually go to the mission field full time. And it was quite apparent to her that Todd did not share her same vision, and as such, no matter how hard he tried, she was simply not interested.

As you can imagine, this was quite perplexing to Todd. While I was worried about public speaking and having to make conversation with people, Todd was worried about how to break down that wall in this relationship. We were both praying a lot and reading Scripture, but looking for much different things as we studied and prayed. One evening Todd asked me to go outside with him, so he could tell me something. He had a finger in a passage of the Bible and wanted to read me a couple verses. It was Matthew chapter 21, verses 21 and 22. This is what he read to me:

***21 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. 22 "And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."***

"I've figured out what to do," Todd said. I'm just going to ask God to make this relationship work out and I'm going to believe with all my heart that he's going to make it happen. This Scripture clearly says that if I just ask and believe, I will receive it. This is the solution to my problem!

Taken by themselves, these two verses could seem to support Todd's argument. All things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive...even causing a mountain to be thrown into the sea. It sounds so clear and easy to understand! And Todd wasn't even asking for a mountain to be moved, just that impenetrable wall the girl had placed between her and him. Todd was sure he had found the secret formula to get what he wanted, and now all he needed to do was ask and believe.

Well, this true story illustrates how desperately we need a deep understanding of Scripture and God's big picture purposes that goes far beyond just knowing a few key verses ripped out of context. And this is because the tempter, the devil, is really good at using even Scripture itself to get us off track from God's purposes. And this is what we're going to see as we finish the temptation of Christ today in Matthew chapter 4, verses 1 through 11. Today's message is called: *The Word in the Wilderness*. Let's begin by reading the whole passage, and then we'll focus on verses 5 through 11 today.

Beginning in verse 1 of Matthew, chapter 4:

***1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." 4 But He answered and said, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.'" 5 Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU'; and 'ON their HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "On the other hand, it is written, 'YOU SHALL 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 glory; 9 and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me." 10 Then Jesus said to him, "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'" 11 Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him.***

May the Lord bless the reading of his Word and cause it to do his work within each of us today.

Before we begin looking closer at Jesus' second temptation, let's just quickly remember the key things we learned last week in verses 1 through 4. First, during these 40 days of intense temptation in the wilderness, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and being led around by him. Jesus was doing nothing on his own initiative but was following the Spirit's lead in everything. Secondly, in battling the devil's temptations, Jesus had one strategy, and that was to replace Satan's lies with truths from God's Word. And it was this perfect combination of following the Spirit AND the Word, never to be separated, that was providing Jesus with everything he needed to stay on track with God's purposes and resist temptation. And finally, throughout these 40 days, Jesus recognized that the Father was the source of both his physical life and his spiritual life. The Father would provide everything he needed to accomplish his purposes, and as such, he

had no need to take matters into his own hands or step outside of the Father's purposes to get what he wanted or thought he needed.

One other big picture item to be aware of in the temptation of Christ is the significance of **the number 40** and the fact that this was taking place **in the wilderness**. In his first temptation, Jesus had quoted that verse from Deuteronomy chapter 8: ***"MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD."*** And in looking back at that Old Testament passage, we find that it's talking about how God provided for the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, just like God was now providing for Jesus during his 40 days of testing in the wilderness. And Deuteronomy 8, verses 2 and 3, tell us what God's purposes were for the Israelites during those 40 years in the wilderness. Beginning in verse 2:

***2 "You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. 3 "He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.***

The 40 years in the wilderness were a test to reveal what was in the heart of the Israelites; *whether they would trust God to provide and keep following his commandments, even when things got hard and difficult.* Of course, we know the Israelites ultimately failed this test in the wilderness, as has every other human being in history, except one. But now Jesus, the One, the Son of God, the Savior, had arrived, and in his 40 days of intense testing in the wilderness with no food, Jesus was doing what the Israelites and no other human being before or since has ever been able to do on their own. By relying on the Spirit and following God's Word no matter what, Jesus was on his way to fulfilling all righteousness so he could offer the perfect sacrifice to pay the penalty for our sin, and do for us what we could never do for ourselves. Jesus was passing the test for us and showing us how our new life in him should be lived.

## II. THE TWISTING AND UNTWISTING OF GOD'S WORD (Vs. 5-7)

So let's look now at Jesus' second temptation in verses 5 through 7 of Matthew chapter:

***5 Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU'; and 'ON their HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "On the other hand, it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'"***

We see some unusual things happening in this temptation. The devil somehow takes Jesus into Jerusalem to the very top of the temple. I don't get the impression that Jesus and the devil walked into Jerusalem and then physically climbed to the very top of the temple. Instead, this seems to be an instant transport of some kind. But however it happened, once they got there the devil again asked Jesus to prove that he's the Son of God, and this time the devil decided to incorporate some Scripture to try and trip him up.

I'm pretty confident that throughout the 40 days of temptation, the devil had heard the words, "It is written," hundreds of times, and here we see him trying to beat Jesus at his own game. In his attempt to deceive Jesus into sinning, he resorts to quoting Scripture and claiming it means something it was never intended to mean. Don't ever think Satan doesn't know Scripture and how to twist it for his own purposes. He's been studying it for thousands of years trying to figure out what God's doing and how to destroy his plans.

In this case, he quotes a verse from Psalm 91, a passage about God's care and miraculous working on behalf of those who put their trust in him and how angels are actively watching out for God's people. Reading Psalm 91 in isolation without considering the rest of Scripture could easily lead a person into thinking that no physical harm will come to anyone who truly trusts God and follows his commandments. And who was doing that more exactly and perfectly than Jesus himself? Satan may also have been trying to convince Jesus that this psalm was a specific prophecy pertaining to Messiah and that it would be fulfilled if Jesus

would just jump off the temple. Angels would rush in and rescue him and the prophecy would be fulfilled.

But there was a big problem that someone with a shallow understanding of Scripture may have failed to uncover. Clearly written in God's Law, specifically in Deuteronomy 6, verse 16, was a command that prohibited God's people from doing exactly what Satan was asking Jesus to do now. The command was this: **"You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah."** What was involved in putting the LORD to the test? Well, the answer is found in Exodus chapter 17, which records what the Israelites did to test the LORD at the place Moses named Massah, meaning, "testing." There in that place in the wilderness the Israelites had run short on water, and rather than respectfully asking God for the water they needed and trusting him to provide it at the right time, they rushed to quarreling, complaining and grumbling to Moses and doubting God's good intentions toward them. And yet still God provided for them as he instructed Moses to strike a rock, and miraculously brought water out of it for them to drink.

Exactly what the Israelites had done there to test the Lord is revealed to us in verse 7 of Deuteronomy chapter 17, which says: **"...they tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us, or not?'"** In other words, rather than trusting God even into the hard times based on the evidence he had already given them of his presence and care for them, they doubted God as soon as things got tough, taking matters into their own hands and asking him to prove himself again and again. And this is even when they had the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night as visible evidence of God's continuous presence with them. The hardness of the human heart runs deep, and this is why we all so desperately need Jesus and the new life only he can bring to our dead, hardened hearts. Jesus became the ultimate Rock that was struck and out of him alone flows the water of new spiritual life!

Well Jesus, in this second temptation, was able through the Spirit and through his knowledge of God's Word to see through Satan's twisting of Scripture, and recognize that to jump off the temple would be to test the Lord...to take an action with the purpose of forcing God to prove his existence and his commitment to protecting his Son...something that was specifically prohibited in God's Word. Jesus also taught us here how to use Scripture to interpret Scripture. Verses

taken out of context and not subjected to the big picture of God's Word as a whole can easily be twisted and used by the devil to lead us astray from God's purposes, just as happened with my friend Todd on our mission trip to Louisiana.

### III. THE POWER OF FULLY KNOWING GOD'S WORD (Vs. 8-10)

Let's move on now to Jesus' final temptation in verses 8 through 10. Beginning in verse 8:

***8 Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; 9 and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me." 10 Then Jesus said to him, "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'"***

Here in this final temptation, Satan pulls out all the stops and takes Jesus up to a high mountain for a fast-paced, moving-picture type journey through all the kingdoms of the world. I envision it like the Amazing Race intro... Flashing from one incredible scene to the next with increasing speed as it goes, so that by the end your mind simply can't keep up with all the scenes flashing before your eyes. The Gospel of Luke version says the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world ***in a moment of time***. That sounds pretty intense to me! Luke also tells us that as the devil showed these great kingdoms and their glory to Jesus, he claimed that he himself had authority over them all and could give it to whomever he wished. Interestingly, Jesus didn't respond to that claim or argue with it, and, in fact, later stated several times that Satan is the current ruler of this world.

The temptation for Jesus here was real. He knew that it was the Father's intention to give him authority over all the nations, so that at his name every knee would bow. But he also knew that there was a very difficult path ahead to get there. He undoubtedly had committed Isaiah 53 to memory and from it had a very vivid picture of what he as the Suffering Servant was going to have to go through before authority over the nations would be given to him. We later see in the Garden of Gethsemane how difficult it actually was for Jesus to go all the way to the cross and endure the physical pain and even worse, the Father's wrath for sin. The temptation was that by simply bowing down before the devil, he could avoid the cross and suffering and still receive that authority over the nations

which was the Father's ultimate purpose for him. The end justifies the means, right? Wrong. In God's kingdom, the means are just as important as the ends.

But while the temptation for Jesus was very real, the right thing to do here was so easy for him to see because he knew God's Word inside and out. And the most basic and central of all God's commands was outlined in Deuteronomy 6, verse 3, and many other places: **"You shall worship the LORD your God and fear him only."** I really love Jesus' response to the devil on this one. He said, **"Go, Satan!"** It's kind of like: *Come on, is this all you've got left?! Everyone knows this one! Do you really think I'm going to commit the one sin that underlies all the others? Get out of here. You're washed up. Hit the road!* That's how I picture what's going on here, but it's probably a little bit too loose of a translation! But this is the kind of boldness and authority that comes from knowing and using God's Word in our battles with the devil and his temptations. When, by the Spirit, we know, believe and use God's Word, it's the most powerful sword available and strikes a blow that sends the devil packing.

#### **IV. THE DEVIL'S DEPARTURE AND THE FATHER'S PROVISION (V. 11)**

Well, as Jesus told the devil to go, guess what? He obeyed! In verse 11 we read:

***11 Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him.***

As Jesus followed the Spirit and the Word and trusted God to provide, he emerged victorious from his 40 days of temptation, and the Father sent angels to minister to him and provide for his needs. And I'm guessing Jesus finally got some of that bread his body was desiring without having to get ahead of the Spirit or disobey God's Word.

Luke says that when the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from Jesus *until an opportune time*. In other words, he was washed up for now, but wasn't done trying to get Jesus off track from the Father's purposes. He would be back again with more and Jesus would need to remain on his guard and connected with the Spirit and the truths of God's Word, just like we do as well.

## V. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

I hope in this study of the temptation of Christ you're walking away with a very clear picture of what Jesus endured on our behalf and for our benefit, and how he teaches us to walk through life just like he did: *following the Spirit's lead and the Word of God in everything AND trusting in God's provision no matter what*. I hope you've seen how important it is for us to have a deep knowledge and full understanding of God's Word and his overall purposes, rather than just picking and choosing a few verses we like and using them for our own purposes or to justify what we want to do.

I'll tell you that things didn't quite work out for my friend Todd when he tried to use those 2 verses out of context from Matthew as the secret formula for getting the girl he wanted. Ask and believe as he might, God didn't work things out in that relationship. I'm confident that Todd would have approached things much differently, had he considered what Scripture says elsewhere about the importance of asking according to God's purposes and not our own...Or had he considered what James has to say about asking with wrong motives focused on our pleasures...Or had he learned to ask like Jesus, who in asking would say, "**...yet not my will, but yours be done.**" Because the truth is, God had other purposes for this special girl who had sensed and responded to his call to the mission field.

Seven or eight years ago I received my copy of the Moody Bible Institute alumni magazine. As I was reading through the section that contained news about my classmates, I came across a picture and article about this same girl my friend Todd had been pursuing so intently in Louisiana. It reported that she'd been serving effectively as a missionary for many years in a Middle Eastern country. She had stayed faithful to God's call on her life, and he had used her powerfully to share the gospel in a very difficult country. But the article went on to say that God had recently called her home...to her heavenly home that is.

You see God had much different plans for this girl that didn't involve my friend Todd. And no matter how hard he prayed and believed, God was not going to give him something that was out of step with his purposes and what he wanted to accomplish. Todd's approach to this whole situation and his ability to see his own heart issues, would have been so much different had he had a full understanding

of God's Word and a desire for God's purposes above his own...had he been willing to seek and follow the Spirit's lead rather than his own.

And the same is true for each of us as we go through life and face the temptations and lies Satan is constantly throwing at us. We desperately need to live and breathe God's Word and know it better than anything else in the world. My heart's desire for each person here is what I shared at our church membership meeting this past week from Hosea chapter 6, verse 3:

***Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.***

What a beautiful promise we have when we're willing to press on...to be diligent...to be persistent...in knowing the Lord through his Word under the guidance of the Spirit. When we seek him this way, he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth. Green grass, flowers and fruit will begin to appear in our lives.

As we close, I want you to imagine for a moment that God himself is speaking the following personalized words from Scripture to you, and what it would be like if you and I truly believed them and actually responded with action to what he tells us to do. Here we go:

*My son, my daughter...*

***1 ...if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, 2 making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; 3 yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, 4 if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, 5 then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. 6 For [I, the LORD] give wisdom; from [my] mouth come knowledge and understanding; 7 [I store] up sound wisdom for the upright; [I am] a shield to those who walk in integrity, 8 guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints. 9 Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; 10 for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your***

*soul; 11 discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, 12 delivering you from the way of evil,...*

My brothers and sisters, *let's know; lets press on to know the LORD* with all that we have. He's there and he wants to be known as sure as the sun rises each day. And as we seek him in his Word and call out to him as if we were searching for hidden treasure... **He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.** And we will be ready to walk through life like Jesus did: *following the Spirit's lead and the Word of God in everything AND trusting in God's provision no matter what.*

## SERMON APPLICATION AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

**Read Matthew 4:1-11, asking the Holy Spirit to guide you as you read. Look at the surrounding verses, take your time and talk to God as you read and meditate on it. Think through the following, writing notes and thoughts and looking up related Scriptures as needed:**

Write down from the passage or from what was shared in the sermon: 1) a truth that stands out to you; 2) anything you believe God is showing you or telling you personally through it; 3) any related Scripture that comes to mind; 4) any questions you have.

Have you or someone you've known ever misused a Scripture by taking it out of context and not subjecting it to the bigger picture of Scripture as a whole? Describe.

How prepared are you right now to recognize when someone (or the devil) is misinterpreting a Scripture and making it mean something that contradicts other Scriptures? What are some things you can do to improve in this area?

How would you describe the Spirit's role in helping you understand Scripture and how are you currently seeking his guidance as you study? Does anything need to change in this area?

Carefully read Proverbs 2:1-12. On the left side of the space below, write out each phrase in verses 1 through 4 that describes what God is asking you to do. Then on the right side, describe in your own words what each phrase means.

Using verses 5 through 12 of Proverbs 2, list out below the various benefits of putting into action what you just described above.

**Summarize below any actions God is asking you to take, any attitudes He wants to change, or any unbelief that needs to be defeated. Pray over these items and make a plan for change by the power of the Spirit.**